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ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, N. Y., AT SECOND CLASS MAIL RATES.

No. 583.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., December 25, 1889.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. XLV.



OR,
A RED RANSOM.

**A Tale of Oklahoma Busters
and Boomers.**

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BUCK," "SIX-FOOT SL," "SILVER RIFLE
SID," THE "TIGER DICK" SERIES, ETC.

**CHAPTER I.
THE BRONCHO-BUSTER.**

"FOR ways that are dark and for tricks that are vain, the Heathen Chinnee is" "nowhar"—as compared with "the everlastin' Yankee." Instance the last Indian steal, Oklahoma. Here are the "frozen facts."
With the usual solemn pledges, this garden of the West was ceded to the exiled Seminoles and their descendants "forever," which forever was brought to an abrupt period when, in the year of grace 1866, the honest white man began to cast covetous eyes on the belongings of "lazy injun bucks."

"LET HIM BE CAPTAIN ADAIR, OR WHO HE MAY, HE IS HERE FOR LOVE OF ME!"

For their inheritance those then in possession were given fifteen cents an acre, plus Hobson's choice—"that, or nothing."

To sugar-coat this bitter bolus, it was expressly stipulated that the territory should be used for the location of other Indians and of freedmen. No white man should gain a foothold within its limits.

Of course this was a fraud from the mark; but poor "Lo," if he knew it, could not help himself.

After a pretense of settling freedmen on the land—a mere handful, too few to be materially in anybody's way, but enough to serve as evidence of the honest intentions of the Government—the whole country fell into the clutches of the Cattle Kings, who divided their plunder among them with barbed wire fences.

But there are lazy white men in the world, as well as lazy Injun bucks. From Dakota to Arizona, from Missouri to Utah, a Gypsy-like lot of vagabonds roam the country in the tilted wagons, moving on when they are "e'ena'most starved to death" where they happen to be.

So numerous are the e people that they form a recognized class in the community, and are known as "Movers."

In 1879 a man with all the instincts of a filibuster and some of the qualifications of a pioneer discovered the legal status of Oklahoma; and by December of the following year he had gathered about him a little army of invasion, six hundred strong, made up for the most part of Movers, with—"to take the curse off"—a sprinkling of honest men, seeking to make honest homes by honest labor.

Then uprose the great and glorious Government of the United States, moved to righteous indignation by this flagrant breach of the treaty, and at the edge of the sword haled Oklahoma Payne and his raiders back over the border. And the Cattle Kings put up their wire fences again, singing peans to their god, the Almighty—Dollar.

But now came the wicked speculator, with his shekels for arguments, and the Lobby at Washington as the arena of his triumph. And while the tramp chieftain wasted himself and his followers in fruitless raids, only to fall dead one day, some said of heart disease, some said of poison by procurement of the Cattle Kings, the lobbyist made plain to the American statesman the sudden dearth of Indians and freedmen, which rendered it forever impossible to carry out the terms of the treaty. Whereupon the Government once more favored its cherished "wards" with Hobson's choice—four million dollars or nothing, as equivalent for a waiver of the prohibitive condition.

This jug-handle negotiation was concluded last winter, with the result we all know—the discomfiture of the Cattle Kings, the smug complacency of the speculators, the magical rise and fall of a city in an afternoon, and the buried hopes of thousands, with the brief epitaph, "Sold!"

The following story is an episode in the struggle between the tramp "Movers" and the Cattle Kings for possession of the spoil of the heathen.

For obvious reasons the Cattle Kings were exceedingly polite to the army officers; and it was a part of this cultivation of friendly relations that one of their number had a barbecue at his ranch, to which were summoned as most honored guests Major Browning of Fort Reno, his pretty sister Ethel, and her school friend, Ada Savoy.

Never did the sun shine more brightly down through the crystalline air, than on the morning when Major Browning and his party rode to the barbecue at Owen Adair's ranch.

They were not yet in sight of the group of low, straggling structures, that gave shelter to the Cattle King and his dependents, when they descried a moving cloud of dust on the distant horizon.

"What can it be?" asked Ada Savoy, whose bright blue eyes had that telescopic power which has led to the selection of blue-eyed men as the best sharpshooters. "Do you see it, Major Browning? Just to the left of that clump of trees. It must be a body of horsemen who have come through or from behind the timber. Could it be—You don't suppose—"

Miss Ada did not finish her question; but looked at her escort with deprecating embarrassment.

But the shot of ridicule came from the other side.

Ethel Browning greeted her friend's apprehensions with a burst of merry laughter.

"Indians? Do you dream of being scalped, Ada?"

"I don't care!" declared Ada, with a pretty knitting of her brows. "I think it is just horrid to have these wretched creatures all about one!"

"But as long as they are harmless? And so romantic! I like to feel the cold chills run down my back when they fix their black eyes upon me!"

"I wish you had my share of the enjoyment!"

Meanwhile Major Browning had been looking through his field glass.

"I think there is no cause for alarm," he observed, with a quiet smile.

He did not explain further, from a wish as it proved not to mar the ladies' pleasure.

Soon the approaching cavalcade was distinctly visible to the naked eye, when it resolved itself into a company of cowboys riding at break-neck speed.

On they came, drawing their weapons as they neared the party, which had pulled up, and brandishing them above their heads with the peculiar yep-yep of defiance so familiar to the western wilds.

"It is Mr. Adair!" cried Ethel, the moment she recognized the leader of the line strung out according to the various qualities of the horses, though Ada, who had picked him out long before, said not a word of her discovery. "Doesn't he ride like a—like a—Pawnee? No, I'll take that back. There is no bow-legged Injun about him! He rides like a true prince of the saddle. I have more than half a mind to cut you out, my dear!"

This concluding threat was whispered so that no one but Ada heard it.

Miss Savoy drew herself up with stately displeasure, disdaining reply.

On came the charging cowboys, circling around the halted party like a band of Sioux braves, swinging out of the saddle to the off side of their horses, so that only a foot was presented as a mark to those surrounded, and in this position discharging their revolvers under the necks of their horses.

It was a spirited display, and so realistic that Miss Savoy's eyes were unusually bright and her breathing rapid, when Owen Adair rode in to the center, and rising to place in the saddle, greeted her with a graceful bow and a smile of undisguised admiration.

"I have come to furnish you with an escort through the enemy's country," he said, laughing at Miss Ada's well-known nervousness about Indians.

"It is very welcome," she answered, possibly with a covert meaning in her words.

Certainly her eyes rested upon his face without disapproval.

"I don't suppose you have come intending to take any of us prisoners?" observed Ethel, slyly.

"I have long been a prisoner myself!" answered Owen, with a look that gave a mock complimentary significance to his reply.

But Ethel outflanked him by promptly answering:

"Let me be the first to offer my congratulations!"

"You will be asked only for your assent," he retorted, not yet willing to acknowledge that he was down.

But she floored him the next round.

"With all my heart, if I have the promise of first bride's-maid!"

By this time the covert subject of this little sparring match was looking exceedingly frosty.

"Had not we better move on, Major Browning?" she asked, ignoring the laughing allusions of Ethel.

Owen made a spasmodic effort to gain her side, but with a touch of the spur she placed herself under the escort of the soldier.

Behind her back her mischievous friend laughed silently at Owen's discomfiture, beckoning him to his fate beside her by teasingly crooking her finger.

"Where is your generalship?" she whispered, when he had submitted to the inevitable.

"There is no questioning yours," he returned, looking with rueful amusement into her twinkling black eyes.

"And do you think I would tamely submit to anything so stupid as my own brother, when there is so altogether bewildering a personage as—well, as there is in the field?"

"I have found your brother a right good fellow, though not quite so bewildering as his sister."

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with Rex but the relationship. Brothers, you know, are like plain bread and butter at a party. One has enough of that at home!"

With this sort of chaff Ethel Browning beguiled the way, at least to her own satisfaction.

At the ranch she found a party of young cattle-men, who had come in since Owen set out to do especial honor to his military guests, and every one of whom was anxious to play the devoted to her. Whereupon she gave Owen his release, with only a derisive wink as return for his efforts to entertain her.

It was not very difficult for him to make his peace with Miss Savoy, though there continued a touch of unforgiving hauteur in her manner.

She was a stately beauty, and this became her well.

She quite eclipsed the other ladies from the fort; and even Ethel held her own against her only by the incessant play of the merry imps of mischief that were rife in her.

The entertainment was a truly Western one, the stiff formality of the East giving place to a breezy freedom in keeping with the unbounded "elbow-room" of the country.

Everybody was boisterously gay, without fear of offending the proprieties. It could not well be otherwise, when the principal source of pleasure was the saddle.

The cowboys displayed their wonderful horse-

manship, their skill with the revolver, lasso, etc. There was running, wrestling, and even a somewhat spirited sparring match.

Of course there was the best of good eating; tobacco suited those who could draw contentment through a pipe-stem; and, if the truth must out, it was not a cold-water party by compulsion.

But the crowning feature of the day was reserved by the young host for himself.

If there was one thing in which Owen Adair took an irrational pride, it was his reputation as a "broncho-bu'ster."

He always insisted that he liked a horse, as a woman, "with a spice of the devil" in him.

On this occasion he was dressed in full cowboy rig, not forgetting the clumsy-looking leggings with which the lower extremities are protected.

When the time came for him to show how the untamed horse of the prairie is broken, he rode with his guests to where his herders were keeping a large drove of mustangs in a compact body.

Pointing out the animal he had selected, he plunged into the herd to cut out his victim.

The struggle that ensued corroborated the statement of a fellow-ranchman, that he had picked out the worst specimen in the lot.

"Adair is welcome to the glory he'll get out of that match," said Carl Berkhardt, who was for the moment the favored man with Ethel Browning, if one could be called favored where half a dozen others were in receipt of a running fire of smiles and badinage.

"Is it so hazardous, Mr. Berkhardt?" asked Ethel, with the off-hand carelessness of one who had no great realization of danger.

"Well, the beast nearly broke the neck of our best bu'ster. That's the reason Adair has taken him in hand."

"But, why does he tempt Providence in that way? What strange heads you fellows have on your shoulders! One would think that a most excellent reason for letting the brute alone."

Berkhardt laughed.

"I am afraid that, as a warrior, you would lead no forlorn hopes, Miss Ethel."

"Indeed I would not! What is the use in getting yourself killed to no purpose?"

"Is *glory* nothing? And you will never know what a salve it is to broken bones, to have a pair—a particular pair, you understand—of bright eyes look shy admiration at you."

"Oh! So you do it for us, do you? I wonder for whom Mr. Adair is risking his precious neck?"

"I know whom I should do it for—if at all!" laughed Berkhardt.

"Whom?" asked Ethel, with such bright curiosity, and such a steady and straightforward look in the eye, that Berkhardt was daunted; and two red spots that would have become his sister appeared in his fair German cheeks.

"Why—why—"

But he stammered and broke down.

"You haven't the pluck to tell, any more than to ride that frisky broncho!" declared Miss Ethel, turning from him with a shrug.

Berkhardt got out of the scrape as best he could.

"You are giving a better answer than I did to your first question," he said. "Do not be surprised if you hear of my taking to broncho-busting after this."

"When you do," said Ethel, turning back to him with a dazzling smile, "let me see you ride."

"By Jove!—I—I beg your pardon! But it won't be long!"

And the impressionable fellow looked as if he meant it.

Meanwhile Ada Savoy had heard without comment. Her eyes grew darker as she watched Owen flashing back and forth in the surging mass of horses.

Soon he had the vicious broncho out of the drove and thrown on the ground.

To hold him down and bind and blind him till saddle and bridle could be strapped securely in place, was the liveliest kind of work for himself and two or three others.

Then the animal was allowed to rise, only to stand stock-still, trembling in every nerve.

Owen leaped into the saddle, seating himself securely, and gathering the rein in a firm hand, the beast still standing like a quivering statue.

Then lifting his hat to his guests with a cheerful smile, he said:

"This is the last you will see of me for some time, unless you have light heels under you. Good-by! Go!"

The last was to his horse as he whisked the blind from his eyes.

Ada sat with parted lips and bated breath. The mingled apprehension and pride in her face was enough to make a would-be broncho-bu'ster of any man.

For a moment the horse stood stock-still, his bloodshot eyes rolling from side to side.

Then, as if propelled by some internal explosion, he shot up into the air, to come down stiff-legged, with a force that must have shaken almost any man out of the saddle.

This was a beginning; and during the next few moments he did everything but turn himself inside out.

How the rider kept his seat was a marvel. If he had been a part of the animal, he could not have seemed more secure. Owen kept laughing derisively as he slatted the beast with his broad-brimmed hat and prodded him with the spur.

The climax was reached when the maddened brute threw himself over backward.

Ada's lips were bloodless, and an involuntary cry of alarm escaped her. The others were scarcely less affected; but the gasp of apprehension ended in a shout of applause as Owen appeared standing on his feet, ready to renew the struggle as soon as his horse arose.

The broncho was not slow in scrambling to his feet; but he found his master as firmly seated as before, with only added determination in his spurs, and in the bridle-rein.

Then, with a squeal of rage, the rebel set off at railroad speed, scouring the prairie like a bird on the wing.

"Come on!" shouted Owen. "Now the best legs win!"

And away the whole party flashed in pursuit. It was far more exciting sport than a fox-chase. The issue might involve a broken neck.

There was one in the following company who outstripped all competitors.

Ada Savoy was superbly mounted. She had had the choice of horse-flesh at the fort, and had proved her knowledge by selecting the best.

Now she led everything, but not keeping pace with the wild mustang, nor with even a fair promise of holding him in sight to the end of the race.

CHAPTER II.

RIVALS.

On the banks of the beautiful North Fork of the Canadian River stood a fair young girl, fishing with a hazel rod for a lily that floated on the surface of the water in a shallow eddy.

She had cut the rod with a reversed fork at one end, and, supporting herself by clinging to a branch of a cottonwood tree that grew out over the stream, she sought to pass her improvised hook round the stem of the lily, and so pull it up by the roots.

When she had secured the trophy, and having cleaned its stem of slime, held it in triumph and pleased admiration at her bosom, the easy-flowing lines of her lithe young figure were charmingly striking.

Her face was just the accompaniment one would wish—red-lipped, fair-cheeked, and with clear, fearless gray eyes, the whole framed in a silken wealth of dark-brown hair.

Her dress, of utmost simplicity, had no charm save that it borrowed from her person. There was not the relief of even a knot of ribbon, as a suggestion of maiden coquetry.

Pearl Pancoast—no one thought of disputing it—was the belle of Oklahoma.

To see the effect of her simple ornament, she threw herself down on the bank and leaned once more over the water, to use its smooth surface as a mirror.

Yet it was not with vanity that she gazed at her own beauty.

As the thought flashed across her mind that some day some one would prize it even more than she did, rival roses suddenly glowed in her cheeks, and she started back in pretty shame.

But it left her with a dreamy light in her eyes, growing softer and darker as she lost herself in castle-building.

Who would it be? Not one of the clumsy young fellows who sought in their boisterous way to win favor in her eyes. She knew them all, with qualified admiration of their strength and boldness in some cases, but with none of that sweet satisfaction which her heart craved.

They thought that a pinch on the arm, or a stinging slap with their broad-brimmed hats, followed by a roar of laughter, was a suitable preliminary to the more serious business of "keepin' comp'ny."

Her father's affection for her found its natural expression in a rough-and-tumble "tousle," as he called it, or more often "mauling" or "deviling."

But this roughness, lost sight of in the tenderness of heart underlying it, which she had experienced all her life, did not in him offend her delicacy, as it did in the younger men who sought a like familiarity.

Maybe, when the right one came along, she would welcome his bluff love-making with the same indulgence.

But meanwhile she dreamed of a prince, gentle without unmanliness; winning, but no weakling; a poet in fancy, yet a hero in action.

Even as she heaved a sigh of fear that it would never be more than a disappointed dream, she was startled out of her reverie by the rapid thud of a horse's hoofs in the prairie loam behind her.

As is common in that country, the course of the river was marked by a belt of timber. Where she sat she could not see nor be seen by any one passing on the open prairie.

Curious to know who it might be, yet cautious about discovering herself, she sprung up and stole through the chaparral, to peer forth from her leafy covert.

She saw, not one of the people of her daily association, but a cowboy, riding a mud-bedrag-

gled mustang, at a pace which showed that the spirit of the animal was yet far from being broken, though both he and his rider had had a desperate time of it.

The horse's breast was dappled with flecks of bloody foam that flew from his champing lips, and his heaving flanks reeked with sweat, in spite of the fact that he had more than once been submerged in the waters of a ford.

The man's scratched face and torn shirt showed that he had been swept mercilessly through tangled brush.

It was evident that he had turned the untamed beast so as to follow the course of the river, instead of dashing into it.

Seen from where Pearl Pancoast stood, there was nothing in Owen Adair's appearance to distinguish him from any other broncho-buster, and the girl would have allowed him to pass without further thought, but that, while she regarded him with—for a reason presently to be given—a frown of displeasure, the horse stepped into the hole of some burrowing animal, and went down, turning a complete somersault.

With a cry of horror, the girl stood for a moment to see the extent of the mishap before revealing herself; but neither horse nor rider arose from that tumble. The former struggled in vain to regain his feet, uttering cries of pain. The latter lay quite still.

Then, abandoning all further caution, the girl ran out upon the prairie, to see if her help might avail anything.

The speed had been so great and the fall so sudden that Adair, his wonted activity dulled by exhaustion, could not save himself; and he went down with stunning force, narrowly escaping the crushing weight of his horse on top of him.

It was the shock of falling on the broad of his back that left him insensible. Though the soft prairie loam precludes bruising, it is possible to be thoroughly shaken up by a fall, with a severe jar or wrench.

With low murmurings of pitiful distress the girl cast herself on her knees beside the prostrate rider, and sought to lift his head.

Even in that moment she felt a strange thrill of recognition. Not the recognition of personal acquaintance. She had never seen him before. But he, or his like, had been in her thoughts only a moment ago.

Now with a feeling of appropriation, as if he belonged to her, her sympathy went out with a tenderness she had never before experienced.

In vain she chafed his temples and beat the palms of his hands. Then seizing his hat, she ran with it to the river, and returned with water to revive him.

It was all done very quickly; and when Owen Adair came to himself, he saw that he was tended by a remarkably pretty girl, where he had no reason to expect to find girls, pretty or otherwise.

As he opened his eyes, she started back, with tender solicitude, and maiden shyness, and apprehension, all visible in her eyes and manner.

"You do not think," he said, with reproach in his voice, "that I would return your kindness by betraying you?"

A swift flush swept from chin to temples, and she returned quickly:

"I hope you don't believe me so mean as to look out only for myself when I saw you hurt?"

He smiled as he read her countenance.

What a charming one it was, in its exquisite purity and shy simplicity!

Gazing at her, and wondering who she might be, he was for the moment oblivious to his possible hurts.

"Let me thank you for your kindness, and in the same breath ask you to run away and hide yourself again," he said, speaking to her in a confidential way, as if a secret between them put them at once on a footing of comradeship.

The girl felt this in his voice, and saw it in the smile with which his eyes lingered upon her face; and the conscious blood deepened in her cheeks.

"Desert you!" she exclaimed.

Then, in a low, determined voice, she declared:

"No; whatever comes of it."

"You are very kind; but you need have no scruples on my account. I have friends coming—"

But suddenly he broke off, and put the situation a little differently.

"That is to say, there are some ladies and gentlemen who are following me for the fun of seeing that unlucky broncho busted, but I am afraid," he added, looking at the faintly struggling animal, "he is *busted* indeed."

"He ought to be put out of his misery," observed the girl.

And to Owen's surprise, she drew a revolver, as if about to take the task upon herself.

"He has broken his leg off short. He is of no further use. Shall I do it?"

"Oh, leave that for the men who will presently be along!" protested Owen, shrinking from the idea of a woman, and so delicate a one, assuming such violence.

"He had better be dead than suffering," answered the girl.

And the expression of countenance with which

she looked at the beast showed that she shrunk from pain with quick womanly sympathy.

"Here," said Owen to himself, "is womanliness without squeamishness."

Aloud he still urged an objection.

"Besides, it might give rise to question. Will you think of yourself now—and of others? You have no right to needlessly compromise them."

But instead of acting on his suggestion, the girl returned to his side, and gazing down at him with an odd blending of firmness and shyness, said:

"You haven't told me how badly you are hurt yet. What can I do for you? Are you thirsty?"

"Oh, I am all right," he assured her. "There isn't a bone broken in my body. There never was. It has only knocked the breath out of me a bit. I shall be all right as soon as they fetch a horse for me to ride."

"Could you ride a horse, if you had one?"

"To be sure! How absurd! You don't suppose I am made of glass, do you? Meanwhile, you are losing time. They will be here in a moment, and catch you. I should be sorry to have you annoyed because of me."

"How far will they have to move you?" asked the girl, ignoring his anxiety on her account.

"Oh, I don't know. A dozen miles, maybe."

"Where do you live?"

Owen almost caught his breath at this pointed question.

What was it that moved him to deceit?

"I hang out at Cap Adair's," he answered, with an off-hand air.

"Cap Adair's?"

The girl's eyes flashed, the color receded from her face, and she compressed her lips angrily.

"I've heard of him," she said, in a low, defiant voice.

Owen felicitated himself on his subterfuge, reflecting with not a little amusement:

"Here's a go! Now I have a chance to realize the poet's aspiration, and see myself as others see me. I wonder if I am regarded as such a terrible fellow."

To the girl he observed:

"I hope it wasn't much against him. He's always on hand when pay-day comes round, and that suits me pretty well."

"I wonder at your staying there, all the same," persisted the girl.

"Why?"

"Why? Hasn't he, and his father before him, been bribing Congress to cheat honest settlers out of house and home? Where did they get the right to fence off the whole earth so that nobody else shall have a spot for the sole of his foot?"

She spoke wrathfully, with heightening color.

But as suddenly she checked herself, and went on:

"But, that has nothing to do with the present. The point is, that you cannot go so far. It will injure you after such a fall, whether you think you are much hurt or not."

"But I can't stay here."

"You can be taken to our camp. It isn't more than a mile from here. And, once there, you can have as good care as you'll get at Cap Adair's ranch, any day!"

Owen could scarcely repress a smile at the spiteful fling at the end of her speech.

But a point of curiosity arose in his mind, and he sought its satisfaction at once.

"Who will tend me?"

There was just the quiver of the girl's eyelids, a scarce perceptible catching of her breath, and she answered, without allowing her eyes to drop before his steady gaze:

"Mother will," and then she went on a little hurriedly:

"We can make a litter to carry you in, so that you will not be jarred at all. But it won't do for you to go jolting on horseback. I've seen men hurt before."

"You are very kind," persisted Owen. "But I still think that you are making an altogether unnecessary sacrifice on my account. If it were only yourself, I might be glad to accept it. But, think of your friends."

He instantly regretted the pointedness of his commonplace compliment.

The girl drew back almost as if he had insulted her—not anger, but with a look of hurt reproach.

"I—I beg your pardon!" he stammered. "But I am anxious that you should go before it is too late. Hark! Ah!"

Following the direction of his glance, she saw a woman coming round a point of timber that had hidden her from view, while the soft prairie loam muffled the thud of her horse's hoofs till she was close upon them.

"Hasten, before the rest see you!" he exclaimed. "I will appeal to this lady to keep our secret. But one of the officers from Fort Reno must be close behind her. Hurry! hurry!"

From a momentary scrutiny of the approaching horsewoman, the girl turned her eyes again to his face.

"I hope your grand friends will take better care of you than we could. We haven't much, but you would have been welcome to it, such as it is. Good-by!"

And she turned short round, not to run for the

cover, as he had urged, but to walk away with stately dignity.

Owen was charmed with the whole proceeding. Her resentment was as harmless as that of an offended kitten. What could be prettier than this display of pique?

If he had seen this alone, he might have thought it a sign of a weak, ineffectual nature. But the firmness with which she had offered to shoot the horse gave him another view of her character.

He called after her:

"One word, if you please! Will you tell me your name?"

She turned to look at him over her shoulder.

There was a momentary pause, in which she seemed to study his motive, or weight the advisability of compliance.

Then she answered simply:

"Pearl Pancoast."

And resuming her deliberate march, she kept on to the timber, neither looking back at him, nor deigning so much as a further glance at Ada Savoy.

Miss Savoy, however, as she approached, took Pearl in from head to foot. She knew every curve in her figure, every shade in her hair, every tint in her cheek.

"Owen! Mr. Adair!" she cried, breathlessly, as she dashed up and flung herself from the saddle.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Ada," he returned, cheerfully. "I have had a little shaking up, that is all."

"You have been thrown! Oh! oh!" murmured Ada, kneeling beside him with clasped hands.

She could only gaze at him helplessly.

"It is nothing," he insisted, with just the faintest possible contraction of the brows.

Was it possible that he was annoyed by her solicitude?

The woman was exceedingly sensitive. She instantly rose to her feet, the color ebbing still more markedly from her cheeks.

"Let me say a word while we are alone," he requested.

A quick wave of color flashed into the woman's cheeks, and she caught her breath.

But before she could bend over him again, his words checked the impulse to do so.

"The girl you saw here is undoubtedly from some boomer's camp, secreted somewhere about here. Of course I do not wish their presence to be discovered through her kindness to me. I will trust to your sense of delicacy not to mention having seen her. And—"

He glanced toward the timber, and saw Pearl standing just within the edge of it, quietly observing his interview with Ada.

"If you happen to meet her ever, and should chance to speak of me, would you oblige me by calling me Cantwell?—as if I was a broncho-buster and nothing more, you know. My middle name is Cantwell. And if discovery should come out of this, I would rather not be known in the matter. They hate me enough already."

"Oh, certainly!" acquiesced Miss Savoy.

And though she spoke with perfect politeness, Owen could not help contrasting a subtle thread of asperity running through her voice with what he had heard in Pearl's.

Of the two, Miss Savoy, in anger, would succeed in making the subject of her displeasure the more thoroughly uncomfortable.

As if that matter were disposed of, she said:

"I will get you some water."

And she instantly started toward the river, catching up the hat that Pearl had used for a like purpose.

"A woman!" murmured Owen to himself, in despair. "How she will knock everything into a cocked hat!"

He looked to see if Pearl had retreated or would retreat before the formidable society lady.

"Bless her heart!" he said to himself, laughing in spite of his annoyance. "She stands her ground like a plucky little bantam! I'd like to hear what passes between them."

CHAPTER III.

THE WRONG MAN.

It was true that the pioneer belle awaited her metropolitan rival with very bright eyes and a determined defiance in every line of that erect little figure.

If Miss Savoy had thought to overawe her by assuming the grand role, the event left her wiser than before.

"You have laid us all under a debt of gratitude, my good girl, by your kindness to Cantwell," she began, sailing up to Pearl with the lofty condescension of a duchess.

She was cut short by the prompt answer:

"I hope you won't feel yourself oppressed, madam! What little service I have had opportunity to offer was to the gentleman himself; and Cantwell, as you are pleased to call him, has sufficiently expressed his appreciation."

"What an ill-bred person!" ejaculated Miss Savoy, and, drawing herself up to her superb height, she swept Pearl with a stare from head to foot, and turned scornfully away.

"What a forgetful person!" retorted Pearl, in as nearly the same tone as she could for laughing. "She appears to have come for water;

but perhaps she found it too hot for her purpose."

Then, still loud enough for the retreating Miss Savoy to hear:

"I reckon we are quits! The vanquished return in ill-temper, leaving the victorious jubilant! Her 'dear girl,' indeed!"

And tossing her head with a fine scorn as Miss Savoy's own, she slipped away in the cover just as Major Browning came into sight, followed at varying distances by the rest of the party.

Taking the bank of the river down-stream, Pearl ran with the fleetness of a fawn till she reached a point not likely to be visited by any of those whom she wished to avoid.

Here she crept again to the edge of the timber, carefully screening herself in the bushes, from which she peered forth upon the scene on the open prairie.

She saw the incoming party gather about the fallen broncho-buster, with what struck her as marked attention to one of no higher social position.

But she knew that men triumph over adverse circumstances, and make themselves favorites, in all walks of life; and her own estimate of Owen's natural parts made it easy for her to suppose that he thus won for himself unusual consideration.

She realized this fact with a thrill of pride and gladness; but, even as her heart warmed to him, it was pierced with a poisoned dart.

Who was this lady who had ridden so hard after him as to outstrip all the others?

That she was a person of social standing, her voice and manner indicated.

Then, what was to be made of her extreme solicitude for a mere broncho-buster?

Pearl Pancoast, though only a rustic belle, was not so entirely free from this world's guile as to be ignorant of the fact that women of high degree, as the ballads have it, are sometimes attracted by men in the humbler walks of life.

"He guaranteed her silence!" reflected Pearl, bitterly; "and she commanded—*Hands off!* As if I would touch anything belonging to her, with a forty-foot pole!"

The fierce scorn of this finish was very fine indeed; yet Pearl instantly thereafter burst into tears.

She looked down at her, simple dress and then back at Miss Savoy's elegant riding-habit, till the fast-coming tears made the offensive city belle and all of her party a wavering blur on a field of green.

If she had only known that this wonderful creation of art, which seemed to her the most perfect thing possible in the way of dress, was a commonplace to the broncho-buster, who had seen enough tailor-made gowns not to be dazzled by them; if she had only known how the perfect simplicity of her dress had charmed him, as a thing that was a part of her own bewitching personality—maybe she would have felt the inequalities of life less keenly than she did just then.

As it was, she had the bitterness to see even her suggestion carried out by others.

The soldiers cut two long saplings, and stretching a blanket between them, made a horse-litter for Owen to be carried in.

Was he so severely hurt, then? And should she have no means of knowing how he was faring?

That favored one might be near him! She might fan him! She might slip her wrist under his neck, to lift his head while she held a cooling drink to his lips!

How he would raise his eyes to her face! In some moment of gratitude, would he tell her that he loved her? Would he draw her, resisting, yet yielding, down! down! with her eyes held by his, till—till—

But by this time Pearl had tortured herself into a paroxysm of sobs.

The one thing she had dreamed of, to flit across her life path and disappear forever, like a meteor in the depths of space!

Blinded by tears, she turned and fled the sight.

But before long, when she knew that they were gone, her feet were drawn back to the spot where he had lain.

Why had he been so anxious to get rid of her? So as not to excite the jealousy of the lady he wished to please?

There was nothing to justify such a view, yet she insisted that it was the true one.

He was gone; she would never see him again; circumstances would be too strong for her, and she would sink into the household drudge of—

But at this point in her reflections, as the image of a particular one of her admirers rose before her imagination, she clinched her little fist, and vowed that she would rather go down to the grave a cross and crabbed old maid, in defiance of fate!

A chill touch of air roused her to the fact that she had lingered near the spot till the sun was set.

Then she set out hastily to return to the boomer's camp which she knew as home.

Hurrying along the river-bank, she was met by the very man whose image had stirred her to such wrath not long before.

He was a typical borderman. He had youth and a kind of comeliness in his favor. Broad shoulders, a deep chest, a rather massive jaw, a certain air of independence that stopped just short of a swagger—he was generally held to be a fine-looking young man by the women of the camp.

He was smiled upon by the most and least coquettish of them, whenever he turned from Pearl Pancoast, to break the monotony of his attentions to her.

"Is that you, Pearl?" he asked, hurrying toward her in the gathering twilight. "I'm mighty glad to run across you all right. Your mother was gettin' anxious about your stayin' so long, and so was all of us."

Pearl had let her sun-bonnet slip off her head, to hang by the strings at her back. At sight of Seth Wendover, she had quickly put it on, so that in the gathering gloom it hid the expression of her face.

"You needn't have troubled yourself about me," she said, ungraciously. "I can generally find my way home when I get ready."

Seth's face fell. She was in an unusually unapproachable mood.

He had come out there with a gradually forming purpose to come to an understanding with her.

"As the 'bully of the camp,' it was generally conceded that Seth had the best right to take his pick among the marriageable young women it afforded; and of course nobody would think twice between Pearl and any other, who had the slightest prospect of being able to win her.

Seth had made this election, with a general feeling that the matter rested chiefly with him. Pearl, he believed—and everybody else was of the same opinion—would eventually "get into the traces," as he expressed it, from the absence of any one worthy to compete with him.

To be sure, she was a little restive just now. But what pretty young girl would not enhance her value by a season of coquetry before she finally submitted. He had a young filly that acted just that way before she would come to his outstretched hand.

He knew that her parents were satisfied with him, and looked upon the match as virtually settled.

With Jason Pancoast, his daughter's admirers were a stock theme for teasing; and he always wound up with a smile of proud affection and the assurance:

"Pearl shall please herself. When she picks out her party, he has my blessin' in advance. So go in, boys; an' the best man win! She's worth a scramble, you take my word."

Every man Jack of them believed that; but the best of them admitted that Seth had the inside track.

Never was there a better chance for coquetry, if Pearl had cared to play off her admirers against one another. But she treated them all with such equality, that it was Seth's supremacy in other things, rather than any especial favor she showed him, that gave him the lead in this.

Now he fell in beside her without replying to her rebuff, and they proceeded some distance with dead silence on both sides.

In that gloomy meditation the native obstinacy of Seth's sullen disposition grew with the conviction that his final success was far from assured.

He had come out to speak to her, and he gradually yielded to a dogged determination to make her listen to what he had to say, whether it pleased her or not.

"I've got my hooks on the best bit o' land that lays outdoors, between the Canadian an' the Cimarron anyway!" he declared, abruptly. "I've got the spring, so's I'll have water while there is any goin'; an' it won't be tramped into mud by nobody's cattle, neither. Then I've got meader-land an' woodland, an' perairie that'll raise more grain than you kin stack on it. When we git things to movin', I won't take no back seat for no man in this community."

As this announcement seemed to call for at least an expression of sympathy, Pearl answered:

"I hope there won't be any hitch in your getting it."

"Ob, I'll git it fast enough!" said Seth, with much the same air as he would have defied any one to knock a chip off his shoulder. "Thar ain't men enough in this gover'ment to stand me off when I git sot on it."

"An' now what I want to say is, it won't be no satisfaction for me to squat on this thing all alone by myself."

But at this point Pearl hastily interrupted him.

"I wouldn't go into any partnership if I were you," she suggested. "Father was talking of a scheme to form a sort of company or something, and work the land on improved principles, as he put it. He argued that one good set of implements could be worked more economically than half a dozen poor sets; and that there was money in a division of labor, instead of one man trying to do half a dozen different things. But I told him that there were he and I and mother. We had got along well enough so far, and we

proposed to stick together as long as we lived. If he had a notion for dairy farming, I could manage that. We could have his division of labor among ourselves, as well as by admitting others to make trouble."

"But you won't be with your father always," objected Seth.

"Why not?" demanded Pearl, looking him in the eye as directly as if she really wondered what he could mean.

"You'll be for gittin' married one o' these days," he explained.

The girl shrugged her shoulders with a scornful laugh.

"Not to the best man I have ever seen yet!" she declared. "When I get ready to be any man's drudge, I'll pick out somebody outside of Oklahoma!"

"Ain't there as good men in Oklahoma as outside of it?" demanded Seth, with almost savage partisanship.

"Maybe so," assented the girl, carelessly. "That ain't saying much for outsiders!"

If a man had said this, Seth Wendover would have retorted with a profane challenge to instant combat.

As it was, the implied depreciation goaded him to smothered rage.

His face turned purple. His breath came hard. His eyes burned with slumberous fire.

Without appearing to notice him, Pearl saw this, and congratulated herself on not being in his power, so that he would have no reason to curb his tyrannical nature.

While he choked in the effort to retain command of himself, she went on, with increased positiveness:

"No! So far I have never seen a man who could hold a candle to my father!"

There was a slight wavering in her voice as a picture of Owen Adair flitted before her imagination; but she did not stop to modify the sweeping assertion.

"And I will never give his place to a man who is not at least as good a man as he."

"But it won't be givin' his place," urged Seth, desperately. "A father ain't a husband!"

"But a husband," insisted Pearl, quite reckless as to the consistency of her argument, as people are who care only for the conclusion, and are determined to have their own way anyhow, "is a father—at least in some respects. I always do as my father says; and I mean to always do as my husband says—if I ever have one."

"Thar wouldn't be no quarrel about that," said Seth, with something like grim humor, as he thought of her yielding this implicit obedience to his will.

"But I think there would," objected Pearl.

"Your husband would kick at your doin' jest what he wanted you to?" exclaimed Seth, amazed at this sort of reasoning.

"I think I should be the one to make trouble," said Pearl, quietly.

"But I thought you said you proposed to do as he wanted you to."

Seth felt that he was getting more and more entangled in the subtleties of her woman's logic.

"Exactly," assented the girl. "But he must want me to do as I want to, just as father does."

"Oh!"

Pearl could hardly repress a laugh at the sudden drop in Seth's voice.

There was a dogged drawl in it too, which told as plainly as words could have done, that, if he was a party to that arrangement, there would be an obstinate contest over the matter.

"Now," pursued Pearl, in a confidential tone which implied that her listener had no personal interest in the issue, "I have yet to see a man with father's heart, or his good sense, or his comfortable ways. When I do, if I find that being an old maid is such a horrid thing as most people say, maybe I'll think the matter over. But until then, I have a mitten of Jersey stuff, warranted to fit the paw of any man who is fool enough to ask me for it."

When we talk at each other, nobody is ever deceived by the pretense of generality. Seth knew that he had been deliberately headed off. He had got his answer in the most unmistakable terms, yet in a way intended to spare his pride. Avowedly he had not proposed; openly he had not been rejected. Yet the matter was settled for all time. He knew that well enough.

However, there are people who pride themselves on not taking no for an answer, and Seth Wendover was the most mulish of the lot.

"I reckon you'll think better o' that," he said, with a determined setting of all the lines of his face, and a contraction of the eyes that was ugly in the extreme. "I've been gittin' things in shape to marry you myself—"

"You?"

The girl flashed round at him as if this preposterous suggestion took her wholly unawares.

"Me!" answered Seth, doggedly. "You needn't play off innocent. You know as well as I do that it is a settled thing all round."

"A what?"

"The old man is agreeable—"

Seth had gone on steadily, ignoring her interruption; but she cut him short again.

"What old man?"

"Your father—"

"When you speak of my father, I'll thank you to call him by name! He is no 'old man' to you, nor to ten times your better!"

"What's the use o' puttin' on airs about nothin'?" asked Seth, impatiently. "I call him old man to his face; an' I reckon he won't kick if I call him it behind his back."

"Whether he kicks, as you say, or not, is nothing to me. When you speak of my father to me, you will show him the same respect that I do, or you will find yourself without a listener!"

If Owen Adair could have heard her now, and compared her present tone of displeasure with that she had used to him, he would have learned a thing or two about women.

There is one thing, however, to be said in her favor. Though her voice was decided, it did not become shrewish. She spoke in the same low tone that was habitual to her, only with a marked distinctness of enunciation.

Again, instead of flushing with anger, her face whitened.

"Call him what you please," said Seth, yielding the point. "What I'm after is the fact that both your father and your mother air willin' that I should have you; an' nobody else don't think no different."

"You are mistaken," replied Pearl, quickly.

"I reckon not," insisted Seth. "I hain't asked either of 'em point-blank; but they've as good as said it was all right, both o' 'em."

"My father or my mother tell any man that he might have me, before he asked for me?" cried the girl, with a stare of indignant repudiation.

"But that isn't what I meant," she went on, in a changed voice as if this were not worth a disclaimer. "You said that nobody else thought any different. I say, you are mistaken. A person of some consideration in this matter has views as different as it is well possible for them to be."

"That means you, I suppose?"

"You're a mighty good guesser, after you are told!"

"Then you have give me the Jersey mitten you was tellin' about?"

"You have hunted for it persistently enough to find it without my troubling myself."

"All the same, I've got it?"

"You are the best judge of that. You have been talking so at random, that I am puzzled to know just what you meant."

"I'll put it plain, then. Will you marry me?"

"No."

The answer came with merciless quietness and directness.

She could not have answered with less feeling, if he had asked her if she had a pin about her to give him.

The man stood looking at her with a dull glare of hatred in his eyes, his face flushing purple, and then turning gray with pallor.

She returned his glance with perfect calmness. She was her father's daughter; and the Pancoasts were not easily cowed.

"Has any o' the fellers got the best o' me?" he asked.

"None of the fellows has the best of you," she assured him, with exasperating explicitness.

"That means, I go out on my own merits," he said, interpreting her manner.

"If you will have it," she answered, "that means that you go out, as you put it, on your own de-merits."

"You hain't acted so 'long back," he persisted.

"Haven't I treated you exactly as I did everybody else—with common politeness? But maybe you think that my parents and I have managed so that it would be all right, no matter who proposed, when they got round to it?"

"I reckon I've made a fool of myself," growled Seth, wincing at the sting of her sarcasm.

"I don't pretend to be a judge of such matters," she answered him.

Without more urging he turned toward the camp, and she continued at his side as if nothing had happened.

When they came within sight of it, however, he stopped.

"I reckon I won't go in with you, if it's all the same to you," he said.

"I am obliged to you for your attendance," she answered. "But, if you will excuse me, I think it will be more agreeable to dispense with it in future, when I am alone. Of course I shall always be prepared to show you the same courtesy that my other acquaintances receive at my hands, on all occasions."

He regarded her with the same dull stare with which he had received her unconditional rejection, and then dropped his eyes in silence to allow her to pass on.

When we have known people for years, it is not easy to imagine them developing unexpected possibilities of evil.

Pearl Pancoast went her way, never dreaming that she had anything serious to fear from the resentment of her sullen lover; instead, she felt relieved, now that the matter was settled definitely and forever, as she supposed.

During the lagging days that followed, while she was a prey to suspense till she grew pale and

hollow-eyed, and almost peevish, as nobody had ever known her before, she had no suspicion that she was under jealous espionage.

Yet Seth had followed her, and found that she visited the same spot every day, till, secreted near, he witnessed a sight which turned his dark soul into a hell of murderous hatred.

CHAPTER IV.

ON DANGEROUS GROUND.

FOR days our border belle had been eating her heart out. It was a case of love at first sight; and it had "taken"—as they say of vaccination—well.

"If he does care," she had said to herself again and again.

And though she left the conclusion unexpressed, her daily visits showed that it was a belief that Owen would seek her there.

If he could have seen the tremulous anxiety with which she strained her eyes across the stretch of prairie in the direction whence she believed he must come, it ought to have been enough to make a very jubilant lover of him.

And why did she think that he might care, and so might come?

It was only an interpretation that love's instinct put upon a certain expression in Owen's eye as it dwelt upon her that day.

The little god knows his own reflection, they say; and why, indeed, should he not?

But there were moments of treasonable unfaith, when she accused herself of folly, and worse yet, of unmaidenliness.

On this day of days, when doubt and despair hung darkest over her, when she told herself that he was dead or indifferent, she went out, as she had done many a time before, and stood beside the spot where he had fallen.

Scattered about at no great distance were the bones of his horse, which the carrion birds and beasts had scraped as clean as ivory.

The thought that they lay like her dead hopes drove her from the spot; and in a paroxysm of despair and humiliation she cast herself down on the bank of the river, where she had first heard the sound of his approaching horse.

With her face resting upon her knees, she was shedding the bitterest tears of her life, when she was electrified by a voice saying:

"Pearl!"

She did not spring up; but a quiver ran through her, and then she held her breath.

A step approached, but she did not move.

Some one sat down beside her, but she only pressed her hands harder upon her face.

An arm went around her waist, a hand was slipped under her wrists, and she was gently lifted and turned round till her face, still covered by her hands, rested hard against the breast of him who had come to her—at last.

He said not a word, but fell to stroking her hair, to lifting it and letting it ripple through his fingers, to kissing it as the wind blew it across his face.

And all the while she could feel him chuckling softly, in silent self-gratulation.

When he went further than this, bending to touch his cheek to hers and feel it burn like fire, she suddenly forced herself away from him to the greatest limit his clinging arm would permit, with her two hands on his shoulders.

And facing him with eyes that flashed as her cheeks flamed crimson, she cried:

"But you don't! You know you don't!"

"But I do!" he contradicted. "I know I do!"

"You know nothing about me—absolutely nothing! You never saw me before in your life!"

"I know ever so much about you—more than you know about me. I have been watching you when you hadn't a like advantage. As for seeing you before, I have seen you once, you know; and once seeing is enough. I'll take you on trust!"

With an ecstatic cry, she threw her arms about his neck.

"I'll take you on trust!" she answered him.

And this was the treat that eavesdropping Seth was favored with.

She was very much ashamed of her easy surrender, and it required a struggle to get her face away from Owen's neck where she had hidden it, and hold it between his palms, so that she could not evade his devouring gaze.

Even then she put her hand over his mouth, while she demanded point-blank:

"Who nursed you?"

As the significance of this transparent challenge burst upon him, Owen went off in a roar of laughter.

She shook him, and called him a horrid thing, and declared that she hated him, but in a way not calculated to break his heart.

When he could control himself he asked:

"Who do you think? The most devoted creature in the world! Would you believe it, she never left my bedside for a mo—"

"Let me go! Let me go! Oh, you wretch! I'll never speak to you again—never! never!"

"Never! never!" he took the words from her lips. "I will never let you go till you have guessed. Who do you think? You will love her, I know, for her constancy to me in my suffering."

"I'll hate her all my life! Oh, the brazen thing!"

"Hold on! I won't have you talk so about one who is so fond of me, and whom I—"

"Go to her, then! I wish you all the good of her! But you sha'n't have me, too!"

"But I will! I have yet to see a little wild-cat of this description that can get away from me."

"No doubt you have struggled with enough of them to prove your brutal strength!"

"Never anything like this before. What a contrast with my gentle—"

"Oh! oh! I hate her—and you!"

"And I love her—and you!"

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself to—"

She was sobbing.

"Little Pearl, haven't you guessed?" he asked, surprised at her continued misapprehension.

"There is nothing to guess," she sobbed, now resting helplessly quiescent in his embrace. "I knew the minute I set eyes on her. She claimed you—the horrid thing! And you needn't have told me, if it was so."

"Needn't have told you that you have not been away from me—"

"I haven't been near you!" she cried, sharply, comprehending him at last.

"But I saw you, dear," he insisted. "I had only to close my eyes, and there you stood, as plain—"

But her arms were about his neck again, and his speech obstructed.

And while Owen chuckled with huge satisfaction, Seth Wendover ground his teeth till they almost splintered.

What should he do? Stand there, and watch this proceeding? But to what end? For the sole purpose of self-torture?

It did not take Seth Wendover long to arrive at the conclusion that he could put his discovery to better use than that.

To begin with, he had the advantage of Pearl in knowing who her lover was. On the other hand, he fell into the natural mistake, under the circumstances, of supposing that Owen had been making secret love to her for some time.

This at once suggested the thought that these clandestine meetings were not for the girl's real good.

"A man who meant honestly by her would come out and show himself," he reflected.

Suppose, then, he should take her vindication upon himself?

He could make a very pretty case out of it.

To protect the girl for whom every one was willing to do battle from the villainy of a rich man whom every one hated, he had let his righteous indignation carry him to the point of murder—But he thought of a better name for it than that. He called it just vengeance.

He knew very well that, in the existing state of feeling, it would not be difficult to play upon the prejudices of the boomers so that they would hold him in a rather heroic light than otherwise.

There was one thing, however, to be considered.

If Pearl came out against him, declaring that he had murdered her prospective husband from motives of jealousy, it would at least divide public sentiment, so that there would be enough to betray him into the hands of the law, even if a Vigilance Committee was not organized against him.

"But if I'm fool enough to get caught, I ought to hang!" he said to himself, with a dogged setting of his massive jaws. "I'll lay fur him; an' the coyotes will take care of what I leave."

Meanwhile, our lover, though his conquest was complete enough, had some details to settle before the articles of agreement were ready to be signed and sealed by one of the contracting parties.

"I suppose," said Pearl, with a pretty pout, "that she is just breaking her neck after you. Do you offer her any encouragement? Look me in the eye, sir!"

"My dear," protested Owen, with affected embarrassment, "have you no mercy on my natural modesty? You surely do not expect me to say that a lady is 'just breaking her neck after me'—that is to say, any lady except yourself!"

She shook him.

"You are trying to evade me! But you can't do it that way. I am willing to admit that I have made a fool of myself. But, I just as frankly declare that I am not a bit sorry, and that I intend to continue to do it. Answer my question! I insist!"

"Will you compel me to make a fool of myself, by solemnly assuring you that a lady is not 'just breaking her neck after me'?"

"We'll waive that. I don't care what she is doing. The question of importance is what you have been doing."

"I think I may honestly say," answered Owen, with a mock effort at seriousness, "that I have never, by word or deed, save, perhaps, by an occasional polite smile, and by now and then such a compliment as everybody knows has no meaning—"

"What right have you to compliment a lady like that?"

The demand came so short and sharp that

Owen gave an involuntary start of surprise. He had not quite fitted himself to the role he was playing, and to all that it would naturally involve.

It required a second thought before he realized just what Pearl meant.

She did not leave him to think the matter out by himself.

"You know very well," she said, "that she would never dream of marrying you. Then she ought to keep her place, and let you alone. And you have no business to be paying her compliments, whether they are supposed to mean anything or not."

"If I go wrong in the future, at any rate, it won't be for the want of a very exacting mistress," laughed Owen.

"You sha'n't call me jealous!" insisted Pearl. "I am not!"

"What do you call it?" asked Owen, gravely.

She looked at him in momentary hesitation. Then, putting both hands upon his breast, and so pressing against him, as if to hold his attention, she addressed him with the serious air of one who had taken him in charge, for his own good; of all her bewitching moods, the one he thus far found most captivating.

"You naughty boy—"

But here she broke off, and with a quick opening of the eyes, and a blush accompanying her low laugh, asked:

"By the way, what shall I call you? To think, that I don't even know your name yet!"

"Oh! ah! yes, certainly," stammered Owen—"ah—Cantwell, you know. I thought Miss—"

"Never mind miss!" she interrupted, with a quick knitting of her brows. "If you please, we will drop her out of our conversation, after I have said what I wish to about her."

"With the greatest pleasure in life," assented Owen, glad to get away from that other awkward matter—his name.

But he was not out of the woods yet.

"But you don't expect me to call you Mr. Cantwell, like an intolerable New England woman I used to know? I want a name that will bring me nearer to you than that. Everybody has a right to use it. Haven't you a given name? I hope you have two, so that I can take my choice."

"Thank Heaven I have one other," answered Owen, with what he flattered himself was a very deep and dark equivocal in his words, "since you are prejudiced against Cantwell."

"Out with it! If it don't suit me—I warn you in advance—I shall change it!"

"Like coffee, you can sugar to your taste," laughed Owen. "But if I have gone all my life under a name that is displeasing to you, I shall feel sorry. It is Owen."

"Ugh!" she ejaculated, starting back from him.

"Now it's done!" exclaimed Owen to himself. "If I don't handle her just right, I shall lose her. But I should like to see her get away from me!"

Of course he meant that he shouldn't like to see her get away.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "What's the matter? Won't Owen do?"

He spoke very innocently, and took some credit to himself for skill in acting when she replied:

"Owen himself will always do; but the name—I just hate it!"

"Oh, my dear!" still with wondering innocence. "But why? You ought to have heard my mother pronounce it!"

His voice dropped with tender recollection, and the truest part of him came out as he went on:

"It was the sweetest name I ever heard, as it fell from her lips. I have often wondered if it would sound the same from the lips of my wife."

That was his master-stroke. His tones did the business. They had a ring of unmistakable honesty as he spoke of his mother.

The girl suddenly threw her arms about his neck with a burst of tears.

"It shall! it shall!" she assured him. "Even your mother did not love you more than I do, and always shall! Oh! believe that, Owen! And I will forget that it is the name of that villain too."

"Of what villain?" asked Adair, now playing his part boldly.

"Of that precious Cap Adair of yours!" she replied, with a fling of sarcasm that nearly convulsed her listener.

Then, very decidedly, she went on:

"You must throw up your job."

"Of broncho-busting?"

"Yes."

"But—"

"I won't have any *buts* nor *ands*. I want to get that fellow out of my mind. It is bad enough for him to be the scoundrel he is; but I shall never forgive him for having your name."

"How can you judge him so harshly? Do you know him?"

"Know him! Well, if I did, I shouldn't know how to purify myself!"

"Oh, Pearl! Why, my dear!"

"I hate him, I tell you. I know enough about him without knowing him personally."

"But, do you think that he looks like such a terrible fellow?"

"How should I know how he looks? I thank my stars I have never seen him; and I would shut my eyes so as not to see him, if I knew he was about."

Owen was at a stand.

"But this is blind prejudice," he protested, feebly.

"Then," she said, "you won't quit him, even if I ask you to?"

It occurred to Owen that here was a chance which would not often present itself, to test the temper of the girl to whom he had so abruptly engaged himself.

"Is it to be a square issue between you?" he asked. "Must I give up one or the other?"

She looked at him steadily, her gaze shifting from one of his eyes to the other, as we do when we strive to gaze into the innermost soul of one whom, after all, we can read only by outward signs.

"No!" she answered, in a hushed voice, slowly shaking her head. "Nothing that you could do or refuse to do would make me take such a stand as that. Only it would hurt me to know that you held my wishes so lightly, even if they seemed unreasonable to you."

He drew her close.

"And do you suppose," he asked, "that I would not give up all the world at your bidding?"

Then she smiled brightly.

"You were only doing it to try me—weren't you?" she asked. "I ought to have known that! But then, you know, our acquaintance is of such short standing!"

She was laughing and hiding her flushed face in his breast.

With a quick transition of feeling that charmed him, she returned to her former playful mood.

"That matter disposed of, we can go back to our lesson in deportment."

"Our what?" asked Owen, who did not follow her.

"I was interrupted in my disposal of miss," she said, archly.

"Oh, yes! I had quite forgotten her."

"I am glad to see that she passes out of your recollection so easily. But, to prepare you for any chance meeting with her in the future, I purpose to favor you with my ideas on the subject of ladies and their relations to broncho-busters!"

"They are sure to be charming ideas, whatever they are; and I indorse them in advance."

"Wait until you hear them. You as good as said that I was of a jealous disposition, because I objected to your paying compliments to this particular miss! Now I maintain that I am not. The point is, that, not being on her plane in society, whatever your personal merits, a compliment from you to her is a liberty which she ought not to permit, and you ought not to venture upon."

Owen almost let his jaw drop in his astonishment at this view of his position.

But he was devoured with curiosity to get at the thoughts and feelings of the girl who was to be his wife, and about whom as yet he knew so little.

"But you are as fine a lady as she," he protested. "Is it wrong for me to pay you compliments?"

"The case is quite different," answered Pearl, not at all disturbed by the dilemma he thought he had placed her in. "I may be quite as excellent a person"—and she smoothed her dress as a bird might have preened its feathers—"as this condescending miss. I hope I have a better temper than she displayed the other day. But," she added, as if weighing the matter honestly, "I don't know. I fancy I gave her about as good as she sent."

"Tell me about it!" cried Owen, laying siege to Pearl with delighted eagerness.

But she shook her head.

"We have secrets as well as you. Do you tell us about your fights? Do not try to spy out more of our unloveliness than is forced upon your attention."

"Let us return to the point. Social position has nothing to do with personal qualities. If a king were to disguise himself as one of his own huntsmen, and a lady of his court, supposing him to be a real huntsman, and so, of course, a peasant, were to permit the liberty of a compliment from him, because he happened to be a charming fellow like you, it would be all wrong; though the king, in his proper person, might pay the same compliment to the same lady without impropriety."

"But suppose this king of yours—you see, if I should ever happen to be a king, I want to know how to act becomingly—were to meet in the forest the loveliest of all lovely maids, sweeter a hundredfold than the most noble lady of his court—in short, a charming creature, like you," laughed Owen, as he mimicked her designation of him, "and were to pay a compliment to her?"

"It would be an insult, unworthy of him, and which she should never forgive, were he a thousand times a king!"

"What! if he honestly intended to make her his queen? Who was it—King Cophetua—who married the beggar maid? Whereas my damsel

would not be a beggar by any means, but a lady of education and refinement. Oh, I wouldn't have anything but the finest roaming about in my forest!"

Owen was treading on slippery ground; but his manner disarmed suspicion.

"That might make a difference," conceded Pearl. "But kings don't go wandering about in forests in quest of unknown maidens in our day. So, if you will look to the one case that is likely to occur, we will say no more about it."

So it was settled between them; and gazing serenely into each other's eyes, they had no suspicion of what was going on fairly within the sound of their voices.

Hanging with quivering fury upon their every word and gesture, Seth Wendover felt a grip on his arm, and heard a voice hissing into his ear:

"So! You are a man, yet you will endure this!"

Turning with a violent start, he stared into the whitest face, the fiercest eyes, he had ever beheld.

CHAPTER V.

RECKLESSNESS—REMORSE.

WHAT was it in Owen's voice or manner that attracted Ada Savoy's attention to Pearl Pan-coast? Was it the coldness with which he repelled her solicitude?

The taking of the hat for water was, of course, a woman's subterfuge. What Ada was after was a sight of a possible rival.

She got it; and one glance was sufficient. Pearl's beauty was enough of itself to make the lady feel that she must look to her laurels. Her readiness of tongue and her evident ill-will added very uncomfortable suspicions.

"He is deceiving me!" said Ada to herself. "This is not the first time he has met with this rustic Jezebel. His interest is in her personally, and is not a mere question of generosity."

And now the subtlety of the woman appeared. Instead of returning to Owen with haughty resentment, she composed her face to tender solicitude, and her voice was so sweetly regretful that he was completely taken in by it.

How thoughtful she was of his comfort. She would not hear of his being taken home. The Fort was nearer; and her suggestion was that he remain where he was till an ambulance could be brought.

It was only because she did not know of a horse-litter that this plan of Major Browning's was substituted for hers.

So Owen was taken to Fort Reno; and though the proprieties would not admit of Ada's volunteering as his nurse, she was faithful in her inquiries after him, and sent him flowers, and even made him little dainties to eat.

When in the course of two or three days he was about again, looking pale, and with just enough languor to lend elegance to his movements, nothing could be more winning than Ada's attendance upon him.

She read to him, sung for him, got whatever he could not reach handily.

"Don't baby me!" he protested, not quite in the tone a grateful lover would have assumed, perhaps. "You make me ashamed of myself. What I want is a horse and elbow-room."

"I want you to promise me not to ride that sort of a horse again," said Ada, looking at him shyly, from under drooping eyelashes.

"Oh, that is absurd!" was his protest. "My only regret is that that splendid fellow had to be shot. I sha'n't rest easy till I find another, his match for deviltry, or his better at it, just to prove that there never was a horse that any decent man couldn't conquer if he tried."

As if restive under her solicitude, he disposed of the army surgeon's recommendation to quiet with a fling of his hand, and securing a mount, rode to his own home.

It might have been the climate; it might have been his original constitution; at any rate he carried off this revolt against authority with apparent impunity. At the end of a week he declared himself ready for another bout with the best broncho that ever buckled his back.

Meanwhile he was not idle. Again and again did he ride to the scene of his adventure, to keep out of sight, however, and watch the girl who repaired so religiously to the spot.

When it became apparent that she was looking for him, his heart throbbed, his face glowed, his eyes gleamed with the sweetest poison that is ever distilled into the veins.

"She loves me!" he cried, exultantly. "She's as hard hit as I am, I do believe!"

Then, feeling secure, as perhaps no lover ever ought to, he toyed with his triumph.

He kept her waiting, till day after day the anxious light in her eyes deepened, and with a hundred little bursts of indignation and despair she betrayed the passion that was gnawing at her heart.

"It will deepen the impression," was his justification of this proceeding. "I'll never bring a tear to her eyes after I once get her. The little minx!—to think that she should love me so!"

Perhaps it was by no particularly subtle intuition that Ada Savoy also repaired to this spot.

Owen left her to eat her heart out in solitary neglect. If he had not declared himself, at least he had been particularly attentive till now. He had found plenty of excuses for riding over to the Fort.

But now the days passed, and he neither came nor sent word of his condition.

Then the woman roused herself to possibilities of which even she had never dreamed. Till now she had floated with the stream, everything of life coming to her hand. But now the desire of her heart threatened to be lost to her unless she had the courage and address to snatch it from the reluctant hand of fate.

She who had feared Indians, now feared nothing! Alone she rode away, no one knew whither. She was plainly annoyed at Major Browning's expostulation.

"Every soldier in the Fort is at your command, Miss Ada," he said. "If we, your friends, are no longer amusing, you can have attendance that will not interfere with your solitude any more than so many grooms."

"You know I like my own way better than anything else, Major Browning," she answered, with an affectation of archness which had the lie given it by her employment of his formal title.

"How have I been so unfortunate as to offend you?" he asked, between banter and seriousness.

"To offend me?" she repeated, lifting her brows.

"You seem to have forgotten my name."

"Nonsense, Rex!"—conceding so much.

"That's better. But how about the Indians?"

"I have become convinced of my folly. Haven't we talked enough about—nothing?"

Ethel, who could see further into a mill-stone, of this sort, at any rate, than her brother, offered no open opposition.

So this woman carried the bitterness of her heart to the spot where its gall would be thrice envenomed.

She too witnessed this meeting, and made in addition the discovery of Seth Wendover's disappointment and hatred.

Did the savage hatred of the man fan here into hotter flame? Did the expression on his face suggest thoughts that otherwise might not have come to her?

What prompted her to creep up upon him with that fierce clutch and the breathing of that savage challenge into his ear?

At any rate the mischief was done. He turned, and the two looked into each other's eyes.

"Who be you?" asked Seth, in a muffled voice.

"Never mind who I am," she retorted. "The question is: What are you?"

"What do you think I be?"

"A coward!"

The jibe came like a flash of lightning. Seth winced as if stung, and his sallow face turned livid.

"What's the reason I'm a coward?"

"Because you talk when it is time to act."

"What kin I do about it?"

"Bah! Are you a man; and do you ask me? I would give half my life to be in your place."

"No you wouldn't! You'd give half your life to be out of it."

"Dare you risk the whole of yours to get out of it? What do you want of the miserable remnant that is left you? Your face tells its own story."

"You're judgin' me by yourself, I reckon."

"If I were, I should believe you equal to the occasion, and leave you without a word. As it is—Bah! I shall have to seek a better man than you, or take the matter into my own hands."

"You leave it to me," said Seth, with sudden resolve. "I reckon I don't never take no points off o' no woman."

"Very well, then. See that you act promptly and decisively. But let me make one suggestion. If you get into trouble, and you want an ally, go to Colonel Flood. Through him you can get powerful support, if you make it worth their while."

She gazed straight into Seth's eyes, and saw that he understood her, at least in part.

He seemed equally surprised and shocked that such a recommendation should come from her.

"You ain't gone on him, then?" he observed.

With something like a snarl of fury she turned away without a word.

"Waal, I'm glad you ain't down on me!" muttered Seth. "Ef you was a man, you'd be a corker."

What was there in his last audible words that so stung the girl to the heart?

"You ain't down on him, then?" he had said; and clutching her hands as if she could have torn him with her nails for the suggestion, she fairly rushed from his presence.

Her horse was secreted at some little distance. Mounting him, she rode away, at first cautiously, but as she gained the security of distance, with the wild abandon of a mad creature.

If she had been seen by any one in that headlong flight from the devils of hatred and despair that haunted her, they must have thought her distracted.

Now furious tears rained from her eyes, only to be dashed contemptuously aside, and to be burnt up by the fires of hatred.

"Down on him!" she repeated. "Oh, that I might tear him—and her! Will that lout have the courage and address to end it all?"

But, there were moments when love conquered, when she drew up her horse and hung between going on and leaving matters to their course, and going back to warn Owen of his peril.

"A black-browed villain!" she reflected, recalling Seth's scowl. "He will have no pity. He will kill him without warning. And I—I shall have set him on!"

At last the pain and terror of this thought became unendurable.

Turning back, she headed her horse directly for the spot where she had left the lovers.

"I will cast myself at his feet. I will confess all. If that does not touch him, I will go away and die. What matters humiliation? I would rather he despise me than forget me entirely."

The further she rode, the fiercer became her anxiety to reach Owen before it was too late.

"Oh! I was mad! mad!" she cried, reflecting on the time that had elapsed since she had left Seth hanging like a wolf on Owen's trail. "What possessed me? It is as bad as if I were to kill him with my own hand. And I love him! I love him!"

No longer regarding discovery, even by the girl she hated, she dashed up to the spot, only to find it abandoned.

"They are gone! Where? He has followed him! He may have overtaken him before this time!"

She shuddered with horror at the thought.

Then lifting her voice in a wild appeal, she shouted:

"Owen! Owen! Owen!"

She had heard of people being tracked by the trail they left, and she tried to find some trace of the direction Owen had gone. But this effort was soon abandoned. The ground had been traversed in every direction, and she could not distinguish the footprints of wild beasts from those which might have been made by a horse broken to the use of man.

Even the thought of finding the boomer's camp, and warning Pearl, flashed through her distracted brain. But that depth of humiliation was too much for her woman's pride.

"I will follow him. He must have gone home."

With this resolve she set out to retrace the course she had ridden after the broncho.

But, suppose the murderer was before her? Suppose he overtook his victim and accomplished his bloody mission—the work she had set him!—before she could intervene?

No longer thinking of self, she cried out the name of the man she loved; she fired her revolver—anything, to frighten the murderer for the time from his prey; but all was ineffectual. She reached the vicinity of Owen's ranch without having overtaken him.

"I have passed him. He was dead!" she cried, ready to cast herself on the ground, to writhe in her despairing remorse.

Should she make inquiry at the ranch? But her woman's instinctive reserve saved her from this humiliation.

The day was advancing. She would have barely time to reach the Fort in time to escape being the occasion of a scene.

It would not do to have attention called to her absence by having a rescuing party sent out to look for her.

That ride home was the most terrible of her life.

With a plea of headache from over-exhaustion she retired to her room, even denying admission to Ethel Browning.

All that night she tossed on a bed of torture. When at last exhausted nature succumbed, it was only to pursue her with visions of horror.

She saw Owen riding away with the absent smile of a happy lover, lounging in the saddle, and paying no heed to the course of his horse.

She saw the murderer following. She saw the working of his features. Even to his hatred murder was not easy. But in a paroxysm of madness he drew his revolver.

What was it that oppressed her so that she could not move a muscle in defense of the man whose life now seemed to her the one thing desirable in the world?

She struggled to cry out; but her voice was only a rasping hiss.

Then came the flash, the report, a cry of anguish, and—

The tortured girl leaped upright in bed, to cower, dripping with sweat and shivering with a cold that came from within.

No force short of physical coercion could have kept her from the spot where now her whole soul centered.

Heedless of Ethel's anxious looks and of Major Browning's constrained politeness, she rode away.

The utter desolation of the trysting-place, when she reached it, struck a chill to her heart.

Pearl did not arrive at her usual hour.

To quiet her agitation Ada leaned her head against the trunk of a tree and closed her aching eyes.

The quiet, the warmth, the drowsy hum of a

bee, soothed her, and insensibly she yielded to exhaustion, and sunk into the first dreamless sleep she had enjoyed for many a day.

Was it a footstep that roused her into sudden and complete wakefulness?

She was conscious that some one was near her; but the sun flashed in her eyes, and involuntarily she closed them, pressing her hands upon them.

Who could it be? Could it be he!—the one of all men she longed to see alive and well?

A quick breath, a thrill between delight and terror, and then—

"Good heavens!"

CHAPTER VI.

POISONING THE CUP.

SEEK Colonel Flood! That suggestion rung in Seth Wendover's ears with the fascinating persistence of an evil genius.

But his native independence fought against it with dogged obstinacy.

"What fur should I go a-beggin' Colonel Flood, or any other man, to back me? I kin hoe my own row, an' a heap o' resk saved. What nobody don't see, nobody can't give away. I'll salt the snoozer fur all he's worth!"

With many a lingering pledge of undying constancy, Owen at last tore himself away from his Pearl.

As if she could not bear to part with him, she insisted on seeing him on his way; and he would have been less the lover than he was, if he had not returned the compliment by going back with her; so that, with gay laughter at their sentimental folly, they finally parted on the spot which left neither the other's debtor in this manifestation of fondness.

If they had planned to exasperate the eaves-dropper, they could not have fanned his rage into fiercer flame.

Raging like a madman, he raced along the watercourse, to gain a point of timber which jutted out into the prairie, near which Owen must pass on his way home.

He knew the spot well. Even if Pearl lingered to see the very last of her lover, he would pass from view around the woodland promontory before he reached Seth's ambush.

At that distance a pistol-report could not be heard; and so all would be safe.

He gained the point sufficiently in advance, and peered forth to watch for the coming of his victim.

As Ada afterward pictured him in her dream, Owen came leisurely along, his bridle-rein hanging loose on his horse's neck, a dreamy smile of happy reverie on his lips, and his eyes noting nothing of the emerald and blue panorama that moved across their field.

Lying flat on the ground, the murderer cocked his revolver, and held it at a deadly rest.

"Now good-by to ye!" he muttered. "I reckon the coyotes won't leave much to tell tales ag'in' me!"

Holding his breath that his aim might not be deflected a hair's breadth, he sighted along the barrel of the weapon, bringing it to bear directly upon the unconscious lover's heart.

But at that moment he was arrested in his murderous design by the sound of a hasty step approaching him behind.

"Death an' blazes!" he muttered, hastily secreting his revolver, that he might not be taken in the very act of assassination.

He knew instinctively, even before turning his head, whose step it was. If he persisted, the man he hated was inevitably his; but he would be forced to protect himself by immediately afterward taking the life of one against whom he was not yet ready to turn a murderous hand, whatever might be the outcome of the future.

With hurried panting and the swish of her skirts through the undergrowth, Pearl Pancoast flashed by without discovering him.

"Owen! Owen!" she called.

And radiant with smiles she sprung from the covert and stood in his path.

She had taken the same path that Seth had followed to intercept her lover, but with how different a purpose!

"Pearl! What in the name of wonder?" cried Owen.

He leaped to the ground and caught her in his arms; and panting with her rapid run, she hung in his embrace while she recovered herself.

"I only came to tell you," she said, looking up into his face with the laughing love-light in her eyes, "that, when I come to repeat it over to myself, your name sounds just lovely. I would not have it anything else for the world."

"Nonsense!" cried Owen, fain to cover his delight with mock incredulity. "You didn't come for any such reason. That is only an excuse for something else."

Yet Pearl was well content with his interpretation of her motives, and with his way of gratifying them; and little dreaming that her playful fondness had saved his life, she allowed him to lift her to his saddle, and then walk beside her, while he warned her that this was the very last time he would take her back, and if she followed him again, he would carry her off for good.

Baffled, Seth Wendover dropped his face flat

on the ground, and so lay, clutching the grass with his fingers, and breathing heavily, like a man struggling with a possessing demon.

Even when the love-cadences of their voices no longer tortured his ears, he could not look after them.

Wrestling with his mighty passion, he lay motionless till the waning daylight left him in darkness.

Returning, Owen Adair had passed too far out on the prairie to be attacked without warning that would have made it a fair fight between them.

"That ain't the way to git after him," was Seth's final decision. "I reckon it's lucky she stopped me. Whether anybody else suspicioned me or not, she'd always believe I done it. I must strike him without gittin' the recoil o' the blow myself."

So, casting about for some means of effective revenge, he made his way to the boomer's camp.

"I've got it! I've got it!" he cried at last.

"I'll fix him!—I will so!"

And, his pulses leaping with malicious satisfaction, he at once sought Jason Pancoast.

The leader of the invaders was a born master of men. He stood full six feet in his stockings, and had a depth of chest and breadth of shoulders in proportion. Jove-like locks and beard fell upon his shoulders and lay upon his breast. Though they were streaked with gray, his piercing black eyes had lost none of their pristine fire.

"Waal, Seth," was his hearty salute, "what's the row with you, that makes you so down in the mouth?"

"Matter enough," replied Wendover. "But suppose we step aside fur a bit. What I've got to say to you ain't fur everybody's ears."

"What you've got to say to me? What anybody's got to say to me kin be said in open meetin', as fur as I'm concerned. That's me, Jason Pancoast, every time!"

"Don't shout so loud till you've hyeared me out."

"Oh, waal, if it's any accommodation to you."

And, with a careless wave of the hand, Pancoast followed Seth out of earshot of any chance listener.

"Now, out with it!"

"Do you reckon as I'm your solid friend, Jase Pancoast?"

"I've always allowed as you be."

"You kin tie to it."

"I always have, so fur."

"Waal, then, you'll take what I've got to say now quiet, I reckon, as from one friend to another."

"What's the use o' so much hedgin'? I reckon you've got somethin' disagreeable on yer mind. Out with it! I'll take what suits me, an' let the rest alone."

"Thar won't none of it suit you; but it'll stand you in hand to take it all, jest the same."

"Spit it out, man—spit it out!"

"Do you know where Pearl goes every day?"

"Eh? What? What's the row with Pearl?"

"Do you know whar she goes every day, I say?"

"I reckon she goes whar it suits her, as she's always free to."

"What suits her might not suit you."

"Thar's whar you're wrong. What suits her is bound to suit me. She's had her swing this many a day; an' she swings as true as an eight-day clock. I leave it to you yourself."

"I ain't findin' no fault with her when she ain't bamboozled."

"Bamboozled! What in Cain be you gittin' through ye, Seth Wendover?"

"Suppose," said Seth, slowly, "she was seekin' company what you'd druther see her nestin' with rattlers than to have part or lot with?"

"Company blazes!" roared Pancoast, beginning to flame with wrath. "Look a-hyar, Seth! be you drunk, or—"

But here the boomer captain checked himself, and the light of anger giving place to a merry twinkle in his eyes, he resumed:

"Company? What sort o' company?"

Then he suddenly burst into a roar of boisterous laughter.

"Waal, dang my buttons, Seth Wendover, I'm blowed if I don't b'lieve you've lost your grip! I did 'low as you always calcalated to hoe yer own row; but blast my dirty hide—"

"Hold on!" interposed Seth, his dark face turning livid with rage and humiliation. "I hoe my own row when I git a white man's chance—"

"It's a man, ain't it?"

"It is so; an' one—"

"Haw! haw! haw! Waal, I'll shake the daylight out o' that leetle hussy, to please an old friend. But I reckon it won't do no good, ef she's sot. Ho! ho! ho! hoo! hoo! hoo! So she's stole a march on the lot of us, an' give Seth Wendover the sack! Waal, ole man, you needn't come to me whinin' with yer tail between yer legs. You've hyeared what I've got to say on that subject, time an' time ag'in. When Pearl picks out her man, the job's let!"

Seth listened to this outburst with folded arms and face the color of putty.

"When you're done," he said, as Pancoast came to a full stop, "I'll say my say."

"Waal, wade in! I'm done fur the present, till it's my put ag'in."

"It'll be your put mighty quick, ef you're man enough to put it."

"Man enough!"

"I'm 'lowin' as you be, an' that's the why I've come to you."

"Waal, you've gone as fur as you kin git, an' keep me waitin'! I'm a mighty patient man tell you r'ile me; but I'm tetchy whar my gal is concerned. Now come to the point."

"The man what she 'lows to put over my head is a-foolin' of her."

"What?"

"He don't mean her no good—"

"Thar you lie, Seth Wendover! You lie in your black heart! An' I'll ram it down your throat with my fist, an' pull your cowardly heart up through your gullet! The man don't stand in shoe-leather what kin court my girl, meanin' her harm! The man hain't got eyes in his head what kin look at her, an' believe it would pay to try it on! You've got the sack, you lyin' hound; an' you think to git squar' by strikin' your venomous fangs into her tender flesh! Draw your shootin'-irons! Ef you didn't stand on two legs, I'd shoot you fur the cur you be! Bah! it'd be wastin' lead on your like! I'll thrash you with a whip!"

And the boomer leader, in contempt at the possible peril he had drawn upon himself by his reckless vituperation, put up the revolver he had half-drawn, and began to roll up his shirt-sleeves.

Seth made no attempt to meet this attack. He stood with folded arms, looking the enraged man in the eye.

Never had his face been so bloodless as now. Never before had his voice dropped to so deep a pitch of iron resolve.

Whatever else he might lack, he had the nerve that commands respect among men who know what physical courage is worth.

"Jase Pancoast," he said, slowly, "you'll take that back, or you or me, one of us, will claw lead, ef you were twenty times her father!"

"Take it back? Make your words good; show me the man what has dared to look on my girl with an evil eye, an' I'll not only swaller it all—an' I never swallerd anythin' o' that sort before in all my life!—but I'll stand fur you to kick me to your heart's content, and never look round to see when you're through. But come short of it, an' I'll peel the hide off o' you an' use it fur—"

"That'll do! You'd order 'low as I ain't fool enough—"

"His name! That's all I want to know."

"Owen Adair!"

"Adair!"

If he had been struck by lightning, the effect could not have been more abrupt on Jason Pancoast.

The whole possibility of the case flashed upon him at once.

That Pearl would be attractive to any man, he did not need to be told. Hers was a royalty that kings do homage to. Gold has always bowed down before beauty.

But what prostrated him was the thought that Pearl would countenance the advances of the man he hated most.

As if all the strength had gone out of his body, he sunk down on a fallen tree-trunk, and there sat, bowed and broken, the sweat starting in beads on his forehead, his hands trembling with the palsy of deep emotion.

Seth was moved by the effect of his words. To do him justice, he liked Jason Pancoast for himself, independent of his relationship to Pearl.

Putting his hand on the father's shoulder, he said, soothingly:

"I know what's flabbergasted you. But, it ain't so bad as that. She don't know who he is."

"Don't know him? Then what have you been givin' me?"

"Don't know who he is, I said. He's been lyin' to her. She thinks he's only a broncho-buster what's workin' on Adair's place."

If Owen's designs were to be put in the blackest light, it only needed this deception to do it.

"I'll kill him!" muttered Jason Pancoast, in a hoarse whisper. "I'll kill him!"

"No you won't," declared Seth. "You ain't ready to turn her ag'in' you yet."

"Turn her ag'in' me?"

"That's what I said."

"Ag'in' her own father?"

"Ag'in' the Lord himself! She's got her heart sot on this hound. You hain't seen 'em together, as I have."

Seth ground his teeth; but the glare of utter hatred that blazed in his eyes told a more convincing story.

"Seen 'em together?" repeated stout old Jason Pancoast, now a very weakling in his pain.

"When? Whar?"

"She goes out to meet him every day. You must 'a' noticed that she ain't around the camp much."

"I have so!" groaned the father, shaking his head despondently. "An' she never told me! Why, I'd 'a' put my life up on it, as she'd git me

into some quiet corner, an' hold my face away so's I couldn't see her, an' give me the bull story right off the reel."

This added poignancy to his bitterness of soul. Was the girl bewitched? What had won her confidence from him?

"How long has this hyar been goin' on, Seth?"

"The Lord only knows! I've been suspicionin' as somethin' was up ever sence a day or two after we struck this hyar section. I didn't know what it was. I 'lowed as it was one o' the boys cuttin' the dirt from under my feet. I never dreamed o' follerin' her till the other day. Then I found as she went to the same spot day after day, an' watched, an' waited, an' nigh about cried her eyes out because somebody what she was lookin' fur didn't come.

"You hyeared about this snoozer nigh about gittin' his infernal neck broke off a broncho? Waal, that was what kept him away from her till to-day.

"You never see nobody all broke up like she was. I wonder she didn't cut loose, an' go after him, make or break.

"Waal, he come to-day; an' you never see sich a makin'-up. Ef he had her before, she's ten times worse now."

Jason Pancoast groaned, and dropped his face into his hands.

"That's what's the matter with her. I noticed as she was lookin' peaked all the week; but to-night she come home jest wild. I seen it inside of her, bu'stin' out everywhar, like light through chinks in the wall, though she tried to keep quiet, an' not let on."

But the thought that his bitterest enemy—or, rather, the man he hated most—had power to so move his cherished daughter, goaded him to madness, and smiting his knee with his clinched fist, he said again:

"Curse him, I'll have his blood!"

But once more Seth interposed.

"I'd 'a' killed him myself, but I didn't want her curse. The thing's got to be managed mighty gingerly, or she'll throw the lot of us overboard fur him, or his memory, whichever we leave her."

Before Jason Pancoast's imagination passed a picture of his daughter's face as he had last seen it.

Pearl had come into camp a transfigured being.

For days she had been restless, with all her movements jerky and angular; but she had returned from her meeting with the desire of her heart; with her old grace a hundredfold renewed.

The old spring had returned to her step, combining strength with flowing smoothness of motion. The healthful lightness of mien had come back. It seemed as if it was only by constant watchful repression that she kept herself from bursting into glad song.

But it was the shy light in her eyes that her father had liked best. She had slipped by him so that he got only a single glance. At the time he had got the impression that it was a telegraphic communication, such as eye speaks to eye, that she had something to tell him.

And so it was. Ever since she had been able to tear her thoughts away from absorbed meditation on her lover's perfections, she had thought of the moment when, full of delicious confusion, she should double her happiness by ringing his praises into the sympathetic ears of her dear father. Her mother would know, too, of course; but she was her father's girl at heart, and it was his teasing that she looked forward to with most delight.

It was because, back of the mask of ridicule, he so heartily entered into all her hopes and plans, dropping here and there a word of wisdom, so casually that it never seemed like guidance.

But of all her little confidences, what could compare with what she now had to tell him? So she evaded him just at first, to gain time to plan how to break the secret to him.

But thinking that the secret was an old one, and that he had been kept out of it for days, if not for weeks, her father forgot the look, and how he had interpreted it at the time.

He only remembered the change wrought in her, and gauged by it the dominion Owen Adair had got over her mind.

As he looked back upon it, he believed that Seth was right, and that the love of years would be ousted at a breath by this new infatuation.

If she had told him, as she was even now planning to tell him, it would have seemed a gain. Coming as it did from the jealous lover, he insensibly imbibed Seth's feeling, that he had been robbed of the dearest thing in life to him, his one treasure.

"What can we do?" he asked, with a helplessness and dependence altogether new in him.

"We'll let him hang himself," answered Seth.

"Hang himself?" repeated Pancoast. "It 'ud be a queer man that would be in the notion of it with such arms as them around his neck."

"What I mean is, we'll let her know who it is that has been takin' her in. She hates Owen Adair like p'ison. I hyeared her tell him so to his face, never dreamin' as it was Adair she was speakin' to. She was like to break with him

only because his name was Owen, when he told it to her."

"Eh! is that so?"

"You'd orter 'a' hyeared her go on. I reckon he'd druther she'd think him the devil than the man he really is."

"Ef that's so, we'll fix him. You leave it to me."

"Don't you let on as I've put you up to what's goin' on. She's down on me enough already."

"Don't you lose no sleep about me. I'll take this thing in my own hands."

With this new hope, Jason Pancoast went his way, leaving Seth a prey to such anxiety as can best be imagined.

And later in the evening, when he was alone, Pearl came tiptoeing up behind him, and suddenly cast herself on her knees beside him, clasping him tightly about the body, and hiding her face in his beard.

In silence he put his arm about her loosely.

This was so at variance with all her experience of him, that she started back abruptly, gazing up into his face with anxious wonder.

For the first time in her life his sadly reproachful eyes gazed down into the depths of hers.

Their mute questioning frightened her, and with a low cry of appeal she flung herself upon his breast, clasping him about the neck tightly, and cowering close to him.

This was the beginning.

CHAPTER VII.

TRUE, OR FALSE?

WHAT demon of perversity is it that possesses us when we have most need of the gentle inspiration of our guardian angel, edging our tenderest appeals with the harshness of reproach?

Jason Pancoast's heart was bleeding; yet his face was stern, his voice coldly repellent, his words ill-chosen.

"So," he said, "the old confidence is gone! The one I trusted most is soonest won over by the enemy!"

"Father! father!" cried the girl, clinging to him in terror.

What was this intangible spirit of evil that had risen between them, shutting her away from the heart she had leaned upon all her life?

If he had been hopelessly insane, she could not have felt more helpless to cope with his infatuation.

"I do not wonder that you were afraid to tell me—"

"Afraid!"

"Ashamed, I should have said."

"No! no!" she protested, starting up in indignant repudiation. "Neither afraid nor ashamed! I was about to tell you everything."

"The more shame that you should have the hardihood to tell me. But thar ain't no call now. I have found out for myself."

She had started out of his loosely-folding arm, stung by his bitter imputation, so at variance with all his past tenderness that she could only stare at him dumbly.

He had let her go, rising to indicate that this was a time for penance, no longer for their old relation of mutual pride and love.

"I've give you a free foot," he went on. "I thought I could trust you."

"And you can! you can! Oh, father!" she cried, extending her hands in an agonized appeal.

"To sell me out to the first scoundrel that tips his hat to you!"

"What can you mean?"

"I mean to be obeyed, though I never laid commands on you before."

"You shall be!" said the girl, dropping her head upon her breast.

"From this day, you are not to set foot out of this camp till I give you leave."

"Not to leave the camp?"

She started back with such a look of distress that his pain burst into a sudden flame of wrath.

"Girl! girl!" he cried, "have I nurtured a viper all these years, who would rather be the plaything of this villain than the wife of an honest man?"

"He is no villain!" she replied, flaming up with a defiance that equaled his reproach. "You are my father. You can saying anything you please against me; but you shall not malign the man I love, and who loves and honors me as much as I love and trust him."

"Love—the double-dyed scoundrel!" scoffed stout old Jason Pancoast.

"He is to be my husband; and the man who marries me will be as good a man as my father. He—"

"A robber! a giver of bribes! a murderer! Have you lost all shame, as well as all affection? But, hark to what I say! You are not to quit this camp again till you get leave from me."

He turned to go; but she sprung before him.

"Stop! You shall not go away like this. There is some mistake. You surely do not know—"

"I have been mistaken in my daughter. I have never known her. But she has come out

in her true colors now. She defies me for a poisoner!"

"Why do you call Owen Cantwell such terrible names? What has he done to you?"

"Owen Cantwell?" ejaculated Pancoast, suddenly recalling that Seth had defended Pearl's conduct on the ground that she did not know her lover in his true character. "Did he tell you that his name was Owen Cantwell?"

"Of course he did. What else should he tell me?"

"He should tell you that he is a black-hearted liar, as I will tell him when I cut the heart out of his villainous body."

"What is his name, if not Owen Cantwell?"

"Oh, it's Owen Cantwell fast enough, only with the addition of Adair, when he is bribin' Congressmen with one hand an' robbin' honest settlers with the other."

"Owen Adair!"

"Owen Adair! And he is to be your husband! Do you fancy so? Curse him! I'll make a husband of him!"

Now as white as she would ever be in her shroud, the girl held out her tremulous hands.

"Stop, father! There is some terrible mistake. The man I love is not Captain Adair. I hate him as bitterly as you do. But he is in his employ, breaking horses. Oh, you should see him! You would know at a glance that he is all that even you could ask in my husband."

"You do as I have bid you. I'll show you who an' what he is!"

And with this covert menace, Pancoast strode away.

His daughter stood trembling, her brain in a whirl of bewilderment.

What did it all mean? How could such a mistake have arisen?

That it was a mistake she never for a moment dreamed of questioning. Her Owen had only to be seen to prove that he was not the man as hateful to her as to any one. Therefore she was distracted by no fears for his personal safety.

But now her father's words came back to her. She had heard them without quite grasping their full significance at the time.

He had said that the Cattle King's name was Owen Cantwell Adair.

Suppose that was true?

But at this thought she was shaken by such a storm of emotion that in terror at its possibilities she quickly banished it.

But it left her with a quivering sense of dread which she did not define.

So weak that her steps tottered, she followed her father into the tent where he had taken refuge, and stood before him wringing her cold and clammy hands.

"Father," she said, "let me fetch the man I have given my life to here, to you. You will—"

"Fetch him here, with the soldiers he carries in his breeches pocket, and his accursed conspirators, at his back?"

He recalled Seth's words—that the daughter of his love would turn against even him in defense of the man with whom she had become infatuated.

So he went on with increased bitterness:

"You want them to fetch the gallows for your father, and the bayonet for the men, women and children who have come to strike root into the soil."

But she had fallen at his feet with a cry of dismay.

"A gallows for my father! Oh, do you believe that of me?"

"I can believe anythin' of you, after you have sold yourself to the devil. Come! go away an' make your peace with yourself. I will meet this husband of yours in the proper way an' place. If he downs me he's welcome. If I down him, thar won't be no tracks leadin' the enemy to this camp."

Without another word of protest she got up and went out of his presence.

She kept assuring herself that the quivering of her nerves, the great waves of faintness and weakness that swept over her, were nothing! nothing! nothing!

What she meant by that "nothing," she shrunk from seeing. Desperately she fought the sense of fear that oppressed her, as if it were treasonable.

Out into the open air, where she could breathe more freely; out under the star-lit sky, that its serenity might calm her perturbed soul, she went.

What figure was that, which at first sought to skulk away, and then, seeing that it was too late to escape observation, assumed a careless air?

Almost at a bound she stood before him, quivering with scorn and rage.

"You coward! you liar! you infamous hound!"

But she choked, and stood swallowing spasmodically and gasping for breath.

Seth Wendover was not a patient man at his best. Reproach of any kind goaded him to murderous fury. Now he stood as if about to spring upon his reviler and tear her with the hands he kept clutching as a wild beast might sheathe and unsheathe its claws.

While he straggled with his swelling rage he could not speak.

"This is your work!" she cried. "How have you poisoned my father's mind against me? How have you dared to tell him such falsehoods?"

"Ef ye want any thing kept, keep it yerself!" said Seth, bitterly. "I 'lowed as the ole man 'u'd give me away, though he swore not to. Waal, as the thing's out, you might as well git it flat. Thar ain't no use o' your tryin' to cover a smudge fire with a chip-basket. You might 'a' knowed I'd foller you up, an' find out who it was as had got the whip-end o' me. I trailed you home; an' you bet your sweet life I know Cap Adair when I see him."

"You are telling an untruth. You never saw me in the company of Captain Adair in your life."

"I hain't, eh? Waal, I'll fetch you Cap Adair's scalp; an' the next time you see this gay lover o' yourn, you'll see him in a wig, or bald-headed."

"You scoundrel! You know that it is not Captain Adair. But I see through you. You want to dispose of a rival with a blow in the back, under cover of the pretended belief that it is a man for whose death nobody will seriously condemn you. Now listen to me! I am only a woman, but one who can and will keep her word."

"Whether you think him Captain Adair or not, you lay the weight of your treacherous hand upon the man I love, and I will—I will!"

"But, pshaw! He is in no danger from such a coward as you. You dare not fire at his back!"

Once more Wendover could scarcely keep his hands off his scorners.

But she had said all she wished to say, and before he could find voice she was gone.

That night he spent wandering about on the outskirts of the camp, planning dire revenge against the man who had so shattered all his purposes.

At first the sentinel swore at him, in that way intending no offense so common among men of that class; but he ended by laughingly accepting his presence as a relief from the monotony of his solitary vigil.

"Ef you git a hole blowed through your hide whar it ain't convenient, blame yerself, not me!" he laughed. "What in Cain be you skulkin' around fur, anyway? You must be gittin' mag-gots on the brain."

"You go ahead an' do your duty; but before you shoot, give me a fair challenge; an' maybe you'll git a chance to be head-man at a first-class funeral."

Meanwhile Pearl Pancoast tossed on a sleepless pillow.

Never for a moment did she admit to herself that she doubted Owen; yet the very intensity of her passionate clinging to her belief showed that her father's and Seth's conviction had fastened upon her faith like the dread octopus.

There were moments of wild elation, in which she felt that Owen would vindicate himself gloriously, and that best evidence of her love would be to leave him to the test.

But there were other moments of terrible agony, in which she saw him lying on his face on the prairie, with a shadowy form, which could be none other's than Seth Wendover's skulking away in the darkness.

"He will never be given a chance!" she said to herself. "What satisfaction will there be in tearing his murderer limb from limb, after he is gone forever?"

With the dawn of a new day and the approach of the hour of their tryst, she was in no better case.

On the one hand was her father's command; on the other, a life of maiden widowhood!

That Seth would kill his rival if he got the chance, she did not for a moment doubt.

Should she leave him, then, unwarned in this awful peril?

"It is but once," she pleaded with herself, struggling with the habit of obedience of a lifetime. "And my father is misled by that arch-villain! If he knew, he would not hold me to obedience at such a cost. And what is the allegiance I owe him, after all, when the very life of one whose claims upon me are even greater is at stake? Do I owe more to my father than to my husband? Must I sacrifice the one utterly to a mistake of the other, when I can save him with only the sacrifice of duty to that other?"

Of course her love and fear won the day.

Out of the camp she stole, not without self-condemnation that wrung her heart.

So she persisted, love struggling with love, till she came in sight of Seth Wendover also making his way to the tryst.

"The skulking assassin! It is as I feared," she cried within herself, all breathlessly. "Now, if I must kill him, I will do it without faltering!"

She drew a revolver with which she always went armed; and for a moment it was her purpose to dog Seth's footsteps till she saw him in the act of attempting her lover's life, and then anticipate his murderous design with an unerring bullet.

But it was only love that nerved her to this desperation. In defense of her lover she would

be equal to any act of tragic violence; but need it come to such a crisis?

After the first moment, in which the innate savagery of our nature manifested itself, the acquired ruth of civilization came back.

With the thought that murder might be prevented without homicide, duty and inclination coincided.

Hastening forward till she was within easy pistol-range, Pearl leveled her weapon, and commanded:

"Halt!"

Wendover had got near enough to the trysting place so that he had begun to creep forward on the alert; but his attention was fixed before him, disturbed by no suspicion of vigilance on his trail.

A shot could not have brought him to a stand more abruptly, nor caused him to whirl round with greater apprehension.

Like a flash of light his hand went round to clutch his revolver; but the weapon was not drawn.

He found himself looking straight down a group of six pistol bores, held as firmly as if resting on a rock.

"Now, you miserable hound!" cried the girl, "ought not I to serve you as you have it in mind to serve another? If I had sent you out with a shot in the back, you would have had no cause for complaint. But draw your weapon, if you are not too cowardly to meet even a woman. You are after blood; you are welcome to mine, on equal terms."

Of course Seth would entertain no such challenge as this.

Aside from his passion for his challenger, he was not ready to be tortured to death, as he knew he would be, if convicted of fighting to the death a woman in whose defense all the camp would spring to arms at once.

"You're a-bearin' down on me purty hard," he said, sullenly. "Ef you was a man, I wouldn't whine at that. But jest remember you're a woman, with a woman's lease o' gab. I'll be beholden to ye to go as light on me as you conveniently kin."

"You owe it to my being a woman that I do not do a service to the rest of mankind, by making them a present of your room in the place of your company. About face! You have gone far enough in that direction."

"You've got the drop on me; but ef you was a man, I'd chance it."

Sullenly he stepped out of the trail to let her pass him.

She passed, with her head erect, her nostrils dilated and quivering. She did not fear personal violence, nor danger to her lover, now that she was by. So she thrust her weapon back into its retreat in the folds of her dress.

"You're bound to make me out as tough as you kin, now you hain't no further use fur me. But I come to have it out with that thar gent on the squar; an' have it out with him I will, before he steps into my shoes."

"Into your shoes!" cried the girl, scornfully.

"He never will. Nor will you ever step into his. You may depend upon—"

But she abruptly broke off, and throwing up her hand in warning, whispered hoarsely:

"Hush. Not another word. Not a sound to betray your presence here. If you follow me, it will be at your peril."

And, with her face alight with radiance that could have but one meaning, she glided forward out of sight.

In spite of her warning, Seth followed after her.

He saw her unconsciously assume the graceful poses of tender passion, as she flitted from covert to covert, with the purpose of giving her lover a playful surprise.

At sight of him approaching, all her doubts were dissipated, as mist before the midsummer sun.

Her brave Owen! He a deceiver, with that look of eager expectancy on his face?

With wild exultation she imagined herself folding him in her arms and pouring into his ear, with blent laughter and indignation, the slander that had been voiced against him.

How he would smile her fears to rest. With what proud confidence would he go with her into the camp and confront her father, and Seth, if he dared to show himself.

But at this point she stopped suddenly, as if turned to stone by the sight of the Medusa.

With a gasp she lifted her hand to her heart. Wondering dismay and nameless anguish were in her eyes. And Seth, who saw her pain and its cause, with difficulty repressed a yell of exultation.

CHAPTER VIII.

INTO THE SHADOWS.

WAS there ever a happier lover than Owen Adair?

The women he had known all his life had been trained to a set code of propriety, like a squad of soldiers moving at the word of command.

Whatever fate sent to them they took with ladylike self-possession, and never by any possibility overstepped the line drawn by their mammas.

But here was a veritable child of nature,

whose feelings translated themselves into action as spontaneously as a bird bursts into song.

He fell to picturing his new home, brightened by her presence—the gay surprises she would spring upon him, each more charming than the last.

This happy anticipation filled him with such buoyancy that unconsciously he spurred his horse into a headlong dash across the free expanse of prairie.

So it happened that he reached his ranch considerably in advance of Ada Savoy.

All night long the laughing face and flexible cadences of his sweetheart's voice haunted his dreams, and on the following day he set out with greater eagerness than ever to renew communication with the bright reality.

Resolved that she should not put him to shame by anticipating him at the tryst, he went early, intending to hide his horse and then secrete himself where he could watch her coming and note the expression of her face while she waited for a supposed laggard.

If he could only get her to display a bit of temper at his apparent delinquency, and then discover himself and tease her about it.

So it happened that he stole upon the spot where a flash of color filled him with disappointment and delight.

"She is ahead of me! The little rogue! To think that she should be so eager for the meeting, and, above all, let it be seen!"

She was sitting, half reclining, at the foot of a tree. He thought that she was sunk in a tender reverie such as lovers know. Might he steal upon her unawares?

He got within a step of her, approaching from the rear, so that she was half-hidden by the trunk of the tree, when the snapping of a twig betrayed him, and roused her.

Seeing her start forward, he covered the intervening distance with a single bound, casting himself on one knee, and imprisoning her in his arms.

One hand caught her under the chin, and tipped her head back, so that he kissed her over her shoulder, full upon the lips, before he had fairly seen her, and indeed before she saw him.

So little did he dream of any possibility of mistake in that wilderness where women were almost, if not quite, as rare as angels, that he only noticed a mouth between two hands that covered the rest of the face; "an' he went fur it thar an' then," to discover that he had stolen that for which restitution could not be made by giving it back.

Then—

"Good heavens!"

But it was too late to start back with that look of utter dismay. The mischief was done. A woman was gazing at him as a woman gazes only at the man who has her heart in his keeping.

With clasped hands, with fluttering breath, with eyes fairly scintillating, she leaned toward him, breathing tremulously:

"Owen! Owen!"

Here was an awkward situation for a man who, on the one hand, was so leal a lover as our enamored young Cattle King, and on the other, had the instincts of gentlemanly consideration for the unfortunate lady before him.

For the moment Owen could but stare dumfounded.

But the eye speaks the forming thought. She read it, and threw out her arms as if to clasp him about the neck, but reaching only far enough so that her hands fell upon his shoulders, and so sunk forward till her face was hidden in his breast.

And at a little distance, yet out of earshot, a dead-white face appeared above the foliage of an intervening clump of undergrowth, and eyes that must have pierced him to the heart, if he had seen them, took in the scene, and interpreted it fatally amiss.

"Wait! wait!" pleaded the wretched woman, whose every nerve was yet quivering with the shock of his kiss. "I know what is trembling on your lips. But, in return for what I give you, give me a momentary respite. It will cost you nothing but a passing annoyance; and one who is so rich in your love, will not miss what does not lessen her store. Remember, I am a woman too!"

How else could she have so appealed to him? A woman too—like the woman he loved!

What if it were Pearl, so pained, so humiliated, so utterly desolate?

The woman's words of self-abasement had choked her. She was shaken by a storm of sobs that rent the heart in labor with them.

Was he a man; was he a lover; and could he push her coldly away?

But what could he said? Nothing!

Clinging to him so desperately, it seemed as if she would swoon, and slip from his breast to the ground.

His heart swelling and aching with pity, he put a sustaining arm about her, and scarcely knowing what he did, stroked her hair with a soothing touch.

There was the violent agitation of a bush, as a woman staggered a step forward and clutched at it, sinking to her knees with a grasp of anguish.

Knowing nothing of this, the other actors in the scene went on.

The woman lifted her face and her streaming eyes, pleading piteously:

"What shall I do? what shall I do? I am here, like this, and not ashamed! My heart is dead to everything but the agony of my love for you, and the tearing anguish of the knowledge that it is to be cast away as something worthless—worse than that, as a plague, an annoyance—something that you would despise, but for pity!"

The quivering wail in her voice imparted its tremor to his heart, till his eyes grew humid and sad beyond expression.

"No, no, Ada!" he protested, involuntarily using her name, as an expression of the depth of his commiseration. "Not that! Not to be cast away, nor despised!"

How was it possible that she could misunderstand him? Only the egotism of love, of passionate longing, was equal to such blindness.

So suddenly that it was a moment before he realized how it had come about, she cast herself once more on his breast, clinging about his neck with her lips to his.

"Oh, Owen! Is there hope?" she cried.

Then she was overcome, and hid her face with a renewed gush of tears.

What, with a modest man, could equal the embarrassment of such an appeal?

Owen Adair flushed scarlet to the tips of his ears.

"There is some—some mistake!" he stammered. "I—I would shoot myself, if I felt that I was to blame through carelessness. But—but—I beg your pardon—I must tell you your first impression was correct. I—I—"

But he could not give expression to the words that trembled on his lips. By one of those sudden transitions over which we have no control, he was convulsed with a ghastly impulse to burst into a roar of laughter at the grizzly ridiculousness in such a situation, of the hackneyed phrase:

"I love another."

Do we feel one another's emotions without any outward sign?

As if by a subtle clairvoyance the woman seemed to divine what went on within him; and springing up with a snarl like that of a furious beast, she spurned him from her, and stood for the moment unable to speak.

What man can look unmoved upon the passionate intensity of a thoroughly desperate woman?

Of course it was fear of what she might do, not to him, but to herself, that thrilled Owen to the heart, and made him extend deprecating hands, with the protest:

"Ada! Ada!"

His voice, now raised, pierced the shrinking ears of one who lay prone on the ground, shuddering and quivering, as might a patient under the torturing instruments of a surgeon.

"Do not dare to touch me! If you lay a hand upon me, I will kill you, or myself! I hate you! Do you hear me? I put my heart under your feet; and you—you have outraged it! I loathe you as nothing—nothing—Oh God!"

Throwing up her arms wildly, the wretched woman turned and fled.

Could he do less than follow her? What was her fault? Her love for him! Could he abandon her to the ravages of unbridled passion, if you will, but—not to be forgotten—passion for him?

He had raised the storm. Was it not as little as he could do, to make some effort to allay it?

What that one who loved him more tenderly, and perhaps quite as desperately, as this one, lay panting her life away as she heard his retreating footsteps?

Of this he could know nothing. He saw only a momentary disappointment to her, which he could compensate, while this one still struggled with her despair.

Let him see her safely home, with that paroxysm passed. He could do no more. Could he well do less?

He followed after; and the woman left behind reasoned it out all amiss.

It was the lady whom he seriously prized, for her wealth, perhaps—her social position.

Prized her, selfishly. It would be desecration to say that he loved her. She had not the power to keep his fancy from straying to a simple girl, in nothing his equal as the world gauges such things.

He had sought her for the amusement of an hour, beguiling her with those tender perjuries to which she had lent an all-too-credulous ear.

Detected in his faithlessness by the lady who claimed his allegiance, he had gone to make his peace with her, abandoning the one he could better spare.

But who was this man, in whom she had trusted so blindly, by whom she had been so basely deceived?

It was Seth Wendover who brought up and answered this question.

"I reckon you're satisfied, now, that this chap don't put in the heft of his time broncho-bustin'. I could 'a' told you this thing long ago, ef you'd

asked me. He's been danglin' about her at the Fort fur months."

Without a word Pearl got up; without a glance she passed Seth; neither hurrying nor loitering she walked toward the boomers' camp.

On the way she met her father, evidently out in quest of her.

Struck by the stony expression of her face, Jason Pancoast waited for her to speak first.

"Father," she said, in hard, inflexible tones, "I have disobeyed you. I went to my punishment."

"What's all this hyar?" demanded her father, scanning her anxiously.

The great change in her chilled his anger.

She looked away from him wearily, and made no answer.

Seth, who had followed her at a little distance, answered for her.

"She has caught that snoozer up to his tricks. Thar ain't nothin' left fur us to do. He's cured her himself."

"He? Who?"

"Cap Adair—curse him!"

"Adair!"

"We ketch'd his lordship at a bit o' promiscuous courtin'—"

"Enough!" cried Pearl, whirling upon her rejected suitor with a wrathful stamp of her foot.

But this was only the flicker of a dying flame. As if her spirit were broken, her head sagged again on her shoulder, and with a sigh of weariness, she said:

"Let us go home."

Her father, however, would not hear to this.

"An' you let him go?" he said to Seth, not heeding his daughter.

Sturdy old Jason Pancoast's wrath blazed up finely. With a contemptuous glance he pressed past the man who had disappointed his expectations.

"We'll see ef he walks off out o' my clutches!" he growled, ominously drawing his revolver.

But he found his path obstructed.

"Father," said the girl, without excitement, yet immovably, "you shall not go after him."

"What!" roared old Jason Pancoast, staring at the daughter who now for the first time in her life set her will against his.

"You shall not follow him," she repeated, as quietly as before.

"What's the use?" interposed Seth, more disquieted by the prospect of a collision between these two than if it had been two men. "He's cooked his own goose. We hain't got no more use fur him, dead or alive."

He looked straight into Pancoast's eyes, with an earnest protest in his glance.

This probably had as much effect as his words.

The boomer chief yielded the point with a readiness that might have aroused his daughter's suspicions, had she not been so absorbed in the visions that ran riot in her brain.

All three turned and walked together to the camp.

Pearl went to the tilted wagon which was her home, and hid herself and her misery within it.

Seth Wendover seized Jason Pancoast's wrist, and with the grin of an ogre whispered:

"You hyear me, Jase?—we'll have that snoozer yit!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE LION'S MOUTH.

THE next day, sorely perplexed what excuse to make for his failure to keep tryst so soon after the happiness of securing his sweetheart, yet in no doubt as to the impossibility of telling the truth about it, Owen Adair sought the place of meeting.

Of course disappointment awaited him.

"She is repaying me in my own coin," he reflected. "I deserve it: yet—yet—"

After all, he would have been better pleased if she had proved less quick at resentment. Is not the best love long-suffering, and above all, trustful?

But his was not the nature to take pique from pique. If he had that vanity which most people misname pride, it was not so strong as his indulgence.

So he went home disappointed, yet making excuses for her.

But on the following day, when she came not, his faith in her would no longer let him receive this explanation of her prolonged absence.

"She would never punish me like this," he reflected. "She couldn't hold so bitter a grudge."

Then he stood in anxious speculation. What had happened? What was to be done?

"She has been detected; and there is interference," was his first surmise.

But where is the lover whose fears would not conjure up a more direful mischance than this?

It was not long before he had convinced himself that she was ill, or had sustained an accident of some sort. At any rate, she might be at the point of death from some cause or other, for aught he knew; and of course it behooved him to know.

It was not personal fear that deterred him from walking into the boomers' camp and making a peremptory demand on her father.

But he knew that, considering the estimation in which he was held, this would be nothing short

of an open declaration of war, and that henceforth his chance of getting his sweetheart would be rather slim, if he did not have recourse to the primitive method of carrying her off bodily.

"I'll go in disguise. That's the ticket!" was his final resolve. "I ain't much of a bushwhacker, if I can't make my way into that camp in the dark."

And this plan he proceeded to carry out before caution blunted the edge of adventure.

Though he was thus prompt, Owen was not the less prudent. Not only his personal safety, but the happiness of the woman he loved, was at stake. He would therefore take every precaution to insure success.

Though he had never seen Pearl till his fall, yet he had known her father's party before it effected its entrance into Oklahoma; and a discovery he had since made with reference to it was now the basis of his plan of reconnaissance.

That night he repaired to the vicinity of a road-house, known as Roscommon's Roost—a place with an unsavory reputation, the resort of many of the worst characters in that section of country.

His most intimate friend might have passed him by in the dress he wore on this occasion; and his slouching gait was as different as possible from his wonted athletic movements.

Skulking about in the outer darkness, he watched those that entered the tavern till he had found his man.

"Good!" he cried, rubbing his hands in gratification. "I've hit him the first pass. I'd have risked it anyway, rather than wait; but this will make it easier."

Then he waited till a very talkative roisterer made his appearance and staggered off in the night by himself.

It was now well on toward ten o'clock; but, though the watcher's patience had been severely taxed, the condition of the man for whom he had lain in wait restored his good nature the moment he saw him.

"He hasn't staid in there all this time for nothing!" he laughed. "Mr. Jimson, I'm really obliged to you."

Whereupon he set out to track the reeling inebriate.

Jimson was not "blind" drunk, but just so as to be "monarch of all he surveyed;" so there was no difficulty in keeping track of him, though he all the while flattered himself that he was covering his trail with consummate skill.

Leaving the road-house, ostensibly to make his way to another of the same character, he soon left the road, shaping his course across the prairie by a landmark on the distant horizon.

When satisfied of his destination, Owen made a detour, and by rapid riding gained the point for which he was making sufficiently in advance of him to receive him on his entrance into a tract of timber.

"Halt! Throw up your hands!" commanded Owen, standing in the dense shadow of the woods, while the other sat his horse unsteadily in the open prairie, lit only by the stars, yet sufficiently to make him clearly distinguishable.

"Is that you, Jack?" hiccupped the inebriate. "Why, blast your dirty hide! how often have I got to give you that infernal countersign? What is it? Okla-boomer? Boomer-homa? Blow me if I've got the survy thing about me. What in blazes is the matter with Cap, that he sticks us with this confounded nonsense? An' what be you doin' hyar, anyway? I 'lowed as the twist o' this blessed landscape was in my topknot; but blow me if I don't believe that thar dog-gone camp has gone on its travels."

Owen let the fellow ramble on, in the hope that he might drop something that could be turned to account.

Despairing of this, he now called him up with a round turn.

"Air you waitin' fur to have a skylight blowed through the top o' your knowledge-box? Hands up, you drunken fool!"

"Eh? Blow me tight! That's got a business ring. Don't shoot, boss! I'm mighty slim pickin's, though. You might about as well let me pass. If you're down on yer luck, an' hungry, I reckon I hain't got enough about my clowes to help you to a squar' feed. You're welcome to what you kin find on me. An' I'll take it kindly if you'll put up your shootin'-iron. If you're as shaky as I've been, many's the time, the thing might go off by accident, like, before you got ready fur it."

Meanwhile, Jimson complied with the demand of the supposed road-agent.

In that country it was not a surprising thing for a man who found himself "hard up" to supply his pressing wants in this way.

He might be a good fellow, for all that.

"Ride ahead hyar into the shadder," commanded Owen.

"Side-step to the right! That's me, every time!"

And Jimson set his horse in motion by thumping him with his heels.

Owen's hand on the bridle-rein checked the animal; and with equal readiness he disarmed his captive.

"Use me as well as you kin, boss," pleaded Jimson. "I ain't makin' you no trouble."

"Pile off o' that hoss!" commanded Owen.
 "Off's the word! Thar you be."
 "Now, shake them duds, quicker'n greased lightnin'!"
 "What's that, boss?"
 "Snake your dirty carcass out o' them duds, I say."
 "Git out o' my clo'es, pardner?"
 "Peel! Blast you! hain't you got no ears?"
 "Oh, I've got ears like a goverment mule, when you speak loud enough. I hear you, boss."

And Jimson got out of his clothes forthwith.
 "I'm always talkin' business when I shout—now don't you disremember it!" observed Owen, while he awaited the completion of this process.
 When it had gone as far as suited him, he called a halt.

"That'll do, pardner. I ain't a hog."
 "A hog? You? You've left me my shirt an' boots!" responded Jimson, with rueful sarcasm.
 "You wasn't born with as much as that on," answered Owen.

"An' I reckon I won't need as much after I'm dead," admitted Jimson. "But meanwhile, do you expect me to stand shiverin' through life, huggin' my knees fur to keep warm?"
 "You kin do as you blame please," was the captor's permission. "That ain't no funeral o' mine."

And he coolly took possession of the clothes.
 "Ef you're 'lowin' to leave me a raglan o' yer own fur to cover my nakedness, don't stop to hunt the vermin in it," petitioned Jimson, with the sardonic philosophy of the West.

"About face! Cross yer hands behind yer back," commanded Owen, unmoved by the other's gibe.

"What be you 'lowin' to do by me, boss?" asked Jimson, anxiously. "Who be you, anyway; an' what have I done to you?"

"It 'ud be a godsend to your friends fur you to git a spell o' the lockjaw," observed Owen.

And this was his only answer to the anxious inquiries of his victim, as he proceeded to tie his wrists.

Thus secured, he marched him into the timber, and there made him lie down, and bound his feet also.

Leaving him to meditate on the perplexing features of this unexpected situation, Owen made off with the clothes he had confiscated, and with his captive's horse as well as with his own.

He took with him, among other things, a jug which Jimson had taken to and brought from Roscommon's Roost.

In addition to these things, he took the countersign, which he last forced from Jimson's reluctant lips.

Then riding to a point at such a distance from the boomers' camp as best suited his purpose, Owen doffed his own ragged garb, and donned that of the unhappy Jimson.

Leaving his horse securely tied, he rode boldly to the boomers' camp, mounted on Jimson's animal, habited in Jimson's habiliments, and simulating Jimson's mien.

On his approach he was promptly challenged by the sentry.

"Halt, an' give the countersign!"
 "Oklahoma boomers, you blasted fool!" he growled, Jimson to the very tone of his voice.
 "You orter know a pard when he's fetchin' a jug o' whisky, ef you don't no other time."

"I'm obeyin' orders," answered the sentinel, not at all displeased by the opprobrious title bestowed upon him. "I don't know nobody when I'm on duty."

"Allright! By the same token, you won't know the smell o' this hyar dimijohn when you're on duty."

"Hold on, Jimson! You hain't goin' back on a pard like that?"

"Oho! you do know the man with the jug, even when you be on duty?"

"After I git an eye opener, Jim!"

"Waal, don't you suck all the eye-opener out o' this hyar before you let up your death-grip on it."

"I'll know you when I see you again, Jim, on duty, or off duty," was the sentinel's assurance, as he swung the jug upon his elbow.

After a few spasmodic gurgles, he was summarily dispossessed, and Owen rode on into the camp.

He had scarcely passed the outskirts, however, when he was met by a group of men, one of whom greeted him with:

"You're the snoozer I'm layin' fur, Jim Jimson! I reckon this hyar is about as good a time an' place as I'll git fur to have it out with you. So git down out o' that, an' peel. You're my meat, and don't you disremember it!"

CHAPTER X. TO THE RESCUE!

To say that Owen Adair was rather taken aback, would be to "draw it mild."

"Well! well!" he said to himself, "here's a go! Peel—and betray myself! Can I knock this fellow out and yet preserve my identity?"

The risk was too great. He resolved to "hedge," if possible.

As for compromising the dignity of the man he represented, he cared nothing about that.

"You go 'long!" he growled. "I hain't no time to bother with you jest now."

"You'll have to make time, then," responded his challenger, pugnaciously.

Of course he gathered courage as his adversary showed a disposition to avoid an encounter.

"My rocks is talkin' fur Billy Blowhard!" shouted one of his backers.

"I'll handle the lot o' ye to-morrer," promised Owen; "but I've got bigger fish to fry to-night."

And he sought to go on.

But Billy was now confident that his fears in the past, which had led him to submit to indignities from Jimson till he had at last been goaded to desperation, had been baseless.

"You don't fry no fish, big or little, till I've cooked your goose," he declared, putting himself directly in Owen's path, and arresting him by seizing his bridle-rein.

"Go in, Billy!" yelled his friends. "Wipe up the ground with him."

Owen saw that if he was to win by a bluff, he must lay himself out in it.

"If you make me put my hands to you," he said, in a low, rumbling growl, "I'll leave nothin' but soap-grease o' you!"

Bill's voice was not as steady as before; but he had resolved to make a stand, make or break; so he answered doggedly:

"I'm waitin' fur ye, boss. Git down out o' that, or I'll snake you off by the crap."

"I'm in for it!" reflected Owen. "Now, if there is any real excellence in the manly art, I must put it to the test."

And he leaped from his horse.

"Peel," said Billy, now trembling in every nerve, yet determined to die hard.

"I don't do no peelin' fur the like o' you," answered Owen, scornfully.

He had no idea what sort of an antagonist he was to encounter, but in any event it was impossible to betray himself by removing his disguise.

"I have one chance to come through this confounded thing all right," he reflected. "I've got to clean this fellow up without turning a hair myself."

"I've give you your show," said Billy. "Don't say I took you—"

"Look out for yourself!" cried Owen, making an instant spring and lunge.

He got in a clean knock-down, and Billy might have capitulated, but the friend who had goaded him on ejaculated:

"Waal, I'm blowed! An' this hyar's the coyote I've been backin'! Jim Jimson, will you do me a personal favor? Will you kick me clean through this hyar camp? I give you my word, I'll never look round to see who's a-doin' of it."

At that Billy gathered himself with a snarl of fury.

"Hold on thar! I reckon I've got a right to the same show as ary other man. One knock-down don't make a knock-out."

"Toe the scratch then, an' go fur him ag'in."

"Hyers at you, boss!"

Then followed as lively a set-to as the crowd need wish to see.

Mad all through, Bill was no mean antagonist.

"If he knew how to handle himself, he'd give me my hands full," reflected Owen. "Ah! Confound him!"

For, recovering from a staggering blow, Billy jumped in and clinched.

Now there was nothing for it but to bring the affair to a conclusion as soon as possible.

Owen got his antagonist across his hip, and swinging him from his feet, sent him to grass on the broad of his back with a stunning force.

A yell of delight greeted this feat.

But alas for the victor! His hat was torn off.

"Jim Jimson never done that thar!" shouted a voice.

And Owen found himself confronted by Seth Wendover, who scrutinized him with suspicious eyes.

Owen reached to recover his hat; but with a quick movement of his foot, Seth kicked it away.

"You don't want that thar, Jim—not yet," he said.

"Maybe you want some o' the sort that thar snoozer has been treated to," growled Owen, trying to hide his face as much as possible.

"I'd like a good squar' look at you first."

Of course this was the last thing Owen could think of permitting.

He gathered himself for a spring such as the man he counterfeited might have made in the circumstances, only to find himself looking straight down the bore of a revolver which Seth had swung to the front.

"We've got you, stranger!" was the announcement of detection. "Boys, a spy!"

Like a flash revolvers bristled on every hand.

The jig was up. Owen folded his arms, and bowed coolly to his captors.

At this moment a yell of astonishment went up on the outskirts of the crowd.

"Throw up yer hands!" commanded Seth, sternly.

"Gentlemen, I am your prisoner, if you

choose to consider me so," said Owen, in his natural tones. "There is no need—"

"Up with yer hands, blast ye!" roared Seth.

Owen complied.

While they were disarming him the crowd parted, to admit one whose scant toilet Owen recognized at a glance.

"Mr. Jimson," said Owen, "I have to apologize to you for any inconvenience I may have caused you. I hope you will not take cold from your exposure."

"Cold be hanged!" growled Jim. "What I want is a good squar' show at you. Ef you air a better man than me—"

"That's nothin' to the purpose," interposed Seth. "Boys, do you know who this hyar is?"

"Nary," replied one of the crowd, without particular concern.

"It's Owen Adair!"

The breathless pause that followed this announcement was succeeded by an outburst of fury.

"A spy!"

"He's been sent hyar to kill Cap Pancoast!"

"It was his father as poisoned Oklahoma Payne!"

"Or hired somebody else to do it."

"Down him! down him!"

In a twinkling a score of hands were upon Owen's person.

"Hold on, gentlemen!" he protested. "I demand to be led to Captain Pancoast himself. None of you have any right to act without his sanction."

"You'll git all the Cap Pancoast ye want!"

"Who's callin' fur me?"

And Jason Pancoast appeared in person.

"It is Adair, the poisoner!" shouted Seth.

"He waylaid Jim Jimson, downed him, confiscated his clo'es, rigged himself out in 'em, an' stole in hyar lookin' fur you. It was only by chance that I run across Jim, an' then follered this snoozer into camp. I reckon ef I hadn't, you might 'a' woke up before mornin' in glory, with a knife in you."

The fact was that Seth had been on the lookout for some such venturing into the camp by the distracted lover; and so had made his discovery.

For a moment Jason Pancoast stared at the man he hated, now more bitterly than ever.

It gave Owen time to interpose:

"Mr. Pancoast, there is no cause for personal enmity between you and me. Indeed, there is every reason—on my part, at least—"

But here Jason Pancoast interrupted the speaker, looking away from him at the crowd.

"Boys," he said, "I reckon I must 'a' took cold last night. I'm deaf on the right side o' me, an' blind in the right eye so's not to see nothin' as is goin' on. This hyar is your night off. Ef you have any leetle amusement, all I ask is, don't make too much noise about it."

A yell drowned Owen's appeal. Jason Pancoast turned away. Then all was in wildest confusion.

"A rope!" shouted some one.

"We'll send his carcass back to them as sent him hyar!"

"Not till it's putrid!"

But intelligible speech was lost in a general burst of execration.

Owen Adair was not the man to passively submit to such a fate as this. Summoning all his energies, he began such a struggle as his captors had never witnessed.

He succeeded in tearing himself free, and for a time knocked them to right and left. But in the end numbers prevailed; and, bleeding, exhausted, stunned almost to unconsciousness, he lay under a mass of assailants.

One by one they scrambled off, or were pulled away. Then he was dragged to his feet, and hustled toward a tree, a limb of which afforded the gallows designed for him.

Covered with dirt and streaming with blood, Seth Wendover quite lost his head.

It did not occur to him that this tree was in the full flare of the firelight; or he might have borne his victim in another direction.

His one thought was to get his enemy—the man who had maddened him with the smart of physical pain in addition to the chagrin of defeat at love—dangling between heaven and earth.

Even he must have been satisfied with the celerity with which the noose was put about Owen's neck.

Then, with a yell, they bore away on the other end of the rope, and the victim of mob violence was writhing in the air.

But now every ear was pierced by a shriek of fear and anguish.

There was a violent hustling amid the crowd, strong men being knocked aside; and in a moment a girl appeared clasping Owen about the legs, lifting him so as to take the strain off his neck, while she appealed to his murderers with inarticulate cries.

A mob is as unreasoning in its relenting as in its assault.

The despair of that voice penetrated to every heart, filling it with dismay.

The same impulse seized all at once. To a man they sought to ease up on the rope, and to oppose the persistence of the rest.

The result was, that the rope ran rapidly over the limb, so as to let Owen's weight fall suddenly upon his rescuer.

Under it she sunk to the ground on her knees, but transferred her hold as the body lopped over, so as to save his head from a stunning bump on the ground.

He was still dimly conscious, and gasped and swallowed spasmodically when her eager fingers had torn the noose from his neck.

At sight of her, Seth Wendover's first impulse had been to seize her and restrain her by personal violence till her interference would no longer avail, but, in the height of his rage, he yet retained sense enough to know that this would not do.

"Her father!" he thought, and immediately ran for the one man who could assume authority over her.

To escape the legal responsibility of the hanging, Jason Pancoast had betaken himself to one of the tilted wagons.

If arraigned, as the leader of the mob, he could swear that he had not seen it.

Here Seth sought him.

"Jase! fur God's sake, come hyar It's Pearl!"

Pancoast was fairly dragged out of the wagon; and guessing what had happened, rather than understanding Seth's broken explanation, he rushed to the spot where his daughter was spoiling all his plans.

He found her bending over Owen, holding his head on her bosom, and gazing distractedly into his white face, while her tears rained upon it.

With a howl of rage, he seized her by the shoulder of the dress, shaking her, and striving to drag her to her feet.

"Pearl! Git out o' this! What air you doin' hyar!"

"Father!" she cried, extending her arms to him in supplication.

"Don't father me! Git out o' this, I say! This hyar ain't no place fur you."

"But it is murder! They are killing him—"

"Quit it! Do you hyear me?"

"You too!" cried the girl, starting back from him in horror. "Is my own father a murderer? Is this with your consent?"

"Will you go?"

"No! no!"

Tearing herself away by a sudden writhing movement, she sprung back to Owen's side, to stand over him, his defender to the death.

"Hear me!" she cried, raising her voice to a note that thrilled every one that heard it. "If you are a nest of murderers, you shall have two victims instead of one."

And in either hand, from the folds of her dress, leaped a cocked revolver!

CHAPTER XI

WHO IS WITH ME.

RETURNING from the deceptive spectacle of her lover's association with her rival, Pearl Pancoast had been plunged in the most abject misery.

To the ordinary observation, she was merely listless and dull; but her father knew that this was more significant of suffering than would have been the wildest abandonment of grief.

Ordinarily she would have gone to him for consolation; but this, the first barrier of their lives, shut them hopelessly away from each other.

Lying in her tilted wagon, alone with her despair, she paid no heed to the yells of a mob and the excited running of men in their direction till she heard Owen Adair's name coupled with a vindictive oath.

"We've ketch'd him—the infernal spy! He's layin' fur Cap Pancoast like his father laid fur Oklahoma Payne. The ole man give us the slip; but we'll swing him fur the cussedness o' both."

One instant the girl lay as if paralyzed.

It dawned upon her in a flash that he had hazarded his life, not to reach her father, but to find her!

In that ecstatic moment all else was forgotten save the fact that he loved her.

With a bound she was out of the wagon. By the flare of the firelight she saw him. How she got to him she never knew.

But she had snatched the fatal noose from his neck. She held him in her arms. It might be yet alive: it might be dead!

Then came the interference of her father. And when she realized that he was one with the rest of them, she faced them and him with drawn revolvers.

Jason Pancoast started back with a look of horror.

"What did I tell ye?" demanded Seth Wendover. "She's ag'in even you."

"Ag'in' me—her own flesh an' blood!"

"Against anybody and everybody who dares to lift their hand against one who has never injured any of you."

"A spy!" shouted a voice.

"An assassin, and the son of an assassin!"

But Jason Pancoast paid no heed to these supporters.

"Ef I'm to knock under by the hand of my

own daughter, all right!" he said. "Hyar goes!"

And he gathered himself to spring upon her.

"Father!" she cried, sharply, "you shall never touch him while I am alive—even you!"

But this unnatural conflict was intercepted.

"Hold on, Jase Pancoast!" cried one of his men—a young man, who would gladly have competed with Seth Wendover for Pearl's favor—and springing before him, he clasped him in an embrace that few men could have shaken off.

"Ob, I have one friend!" cried Pearl. "Hold him, Aleck! I will never forget your kindness."

"Hands off!" shouted Seth Wendover, seizing Aleck, and trying to pull him away.

"Boys, is this thing to go on?" was Aleck's appeal for support. "Air you wantin' to see her forced to shoot her own father?"

As if by magic the crowd fell into opposed factions.

One gathered quickly about Pearl and her prostrate lover.

She would never forget the kindness of her friends! That was what brought her such instantaneous support.

But Seth had his crowd, already instructed for such a contingency as this. They were ready to back him in anything he dared venture upon, more especially as they had the countenance of their chief himself.

There was a brief scuffle, as furious as it was brief, in which Jason Pancoast, Seth Wendover, and Aleck Hoover rolled on the ground in an inextricable knot of entangled arms and legs.

There was a quick rush of Pearl's supporters, met by a counter-charge from Seth's partisans. Then they fell back with Aleck in their midst.

He was bleeding, yet cool-headed enough to take instant charge of his party.

"Hold on!" he shouted, throwing up his hands, as he sprung between the factions, now arrayed against each other with revolvers bristling in every hand. "Don't forget that we are all friends, an' before we get through with it we may have our hands full fightin' for one another, instead of ag'in' one another. Whatever is right kin be done in cool blood, without our fallin' out over it."

In spite of this pacific overture, if Seth Wendover had then said the word, there would have followed instant bloodshed.

He was backed by the worst characters in the camp; and in every company of men there is such material ready at the hand of the first violent agitator.

Jason Pancoast was thoroughly aroused. His hatred of the son was a continuation of his old hatred of the father.

More than once they had narrowly escaped a fatal encounter, Pancoast declaring that his enemy always sneaked out of it.

When death overtook him, the survivor swore that he had sneaked out of life to escape being kicked out of it by him; so now he would have wreaked his long-harbored malice on the son, even if he had to walk over the prostrate body of his daughter to reach him.

But, Seth's reluctance to come into open collision with Pearl curbed him once more.

"Cheese it, Jase!" he growled, holding on to the raging father. "We can't afford to be whipped at this thing. She's got more with her than's needed to handle us. Let up; an' we'll set up the pins in better shape next time."

And such was his influence over a far better man than himself, that he was allowed to prevail.

The moment he saw that Pancoast could be turned from his purpose, he called off his backers.

"Cheese it, boys!" he said to them, as to his chief. "Thar ain't no hurry in this matter. We ain't buckin' ag'in' Pearl, ef she has anythin' to say why we shouldn't swing this snoozer off into glory. I'low as he's Cap Adair. Ef that ain't so, then who is he? and what is he doin' hyar in Jim Jimson's duds?"

"Let him be who he may, Captain Adair or any other," said Pearl, "I will vouch for his presence here. He is no spy, nor have you anything to fear from him."

"Nothin' to fear from that bloody robber?" shouted Jake Sharp, one of Seth's most violent partisans. "Is he better'n his father? Who killed Oklahoma Payne?—that's what I want to know."

"Whatever his father may have done, or may not have done, has nothing to do with the present case—"

"It is Cap Adair, then?"

"I did not say so. It is a personal friend of mine—one for whom I hold myself answerable."

"Waal," growled Jim Jimson, "all I've got to say is, ef your personal friends all take it into their heads to visit you in this shape, I hope either that thar ain't many of 'em, or that they won't find me out late at nights!"

"The question is, is it Cap Adair, or not?" insisted Sharp. "Let us have him out so's the light'll show him up. Ef it is Cap Adair, you bet your sweet life he ain't hyar on no peaceable errand!"

"Fetch him out!" the cry was set up.

"Let's look him over by the firelight."

"I'll bet two to one, fur ary amount ye dast to put up, as it's Cap. You bet I know him when I set my peepers on him."

"I spotted him myself, the minute his hat come off."

"His first leader give him away. Jim Jimson never struck out from the shoulder like that!"

"Bill Blowhard orter be authority on that subject! Haw! haw! haw!"

"Jerk him out o' that, boys!"

The hubbub was increasing. Pearl saw that if she was to make head against it, she must act at once.

"Have I no friends," she cried, "to prevent this outrage? Has not this gentleman been handled roughly enough by you yet? He has proved his ability to meet you one at a time. Will you again set upon him in a body, like a pack of cowards?"

"Ef it ain't Cap Adair, who is it? An' ef it is Cap Adair, what's he doin' hyar?"

"That's fair enough. We ain't jumpin' on nobody what ain't comin' no shenanigan on us."

"Put him up whar we kin see him. That won't hurt him none."

The fairness of this demand was so evident that it could not readily be met. Yet Pearl knew the danger of letting the mob actually see the man they hated.

Meanwhile, Owen had been recovering from the effects of the violence done him.

It was not in his self-helping nature to remain quiescent while others pleaded his cause.

Struggling to regain his feet, he said:

"Gentlemen, allow me to speak for myself."

He was met by opposition from an unexpected quarter.

"It is not necessary," objected Pearl. "The question is, have I friends who will stand by me?"

She sought to create a diversion by bringing up this new issue, and it was a clever move. But even her friends had a right to some sort of explanation, where so much was at stake.

It was Aleck Hoover himself who addressed her, with respectful deprecation.

"We're standin' by you through thick an' thin, while wood grows an' water runs," he said. "You orter know me by this time; an' I say as I'm fightin' the crowd single-handed, ef it comes to that. But we've got a heap up on this thing; an' I hope you won't lay it up ag'in' me, ef I say as I think you'd orter give us a leetle show to see our way clear. Ef this hyar is Cap Adair, we ought to know it. If it ain't Cap Adair, we'd orter know that."

As if the crowd was willing to rest the case with one known to be as favorable to her as any one could be in justice to the others, all stood silently regarding the girl.

She stood irresolute for a moment. Then, a wave of color sweeping over her pale cheeks, she asked:

"And if it is Captain Adair?"

This seeming admission was received in dead silence.

Their enemy in their midst!—come among them as a spy!—now, for the first time, absolutely in their power!

The girl choked, at some thought which her hearers did not divine, and stammered:

"I should have said, if it were Captain Adair!"

Aleck Hoover dropped his head, and with his eyes on the ground and his voice unsteady, replied humbly:

"We'd naturally want to know what he was doin' hyar, in this shape."

The girl stood with the fire-light on her face, so that its every changing expression could be plainly read.

Every eye was upon her. There was no escaping their scrutiny.

At first the conscious blood dyed her cheeks scarlet, and she seemed to shrink from observation. But after a moment thus, she drew herself defiantly erect; the blood swept back, leaving her pale as death; and she spoke in a tone unnaturally loud for her.

"Let him be Captain Adair, or who he may, he is here for love of me!" she declared. "For love of me," she repeated, "and for no other reason. What concern have you in that? Is this the reception extended by those who pretend to be my friends, to one who comes on such an errand?"

Once more Owen strove to get upon his feet, and assume his own defense.

"Let me speak," he urged. "Not only is—"

But Pearl's hand pressed him firmly down. "I forbid you to meddle in the matter," she said, in a tone of strange sternness. "My word is sufficient among my friends."

The crowd was plainly taken aback by this unexpected explanation, and also puzzled by something in her manner toward the man who held such a relation to her as she declared.

Everybody gaped in astonishment. Only Aleck Hoover found voice, and he but feebly.

"Ef it is Cap Adair, he may be foolin' ye. He's a snake in the grass, like his father before him. What he done at Washin'ton shows him up."

Once more Pearl spoke loud and clear with defiance.

"Ask Seth Wendover if what I say is true or not! He knows that this is no spy. Are you willing to be the instruments of his personal revenge, as against me?"

In that last sentence she overshot the mark. It roused Seth's dogged malice.

"I know it is Cap Adair!" he declared. "I know it was him as swears he carries half o' Congress in his breeches pocket! I know it was his father as poisoned Oklahoma Payne! I know it is his money as will pay any one who gives your own father his quietus! If you hain't got enough o' what I know, I kin give you some more!"

A growl of furious indignation, threatening to swell into a yell which would demand the death of the object of its hatred, greeted this speech.

The reference to her father, throwing the stigma of ingratitude and disloyalty upon her, was the most venomous thrust of Seth's retort.

Pearl saw that to counteract the effect of this she must strike her highest note of appeal.

"This is the man I love!" she cried. "The blow that reaches him must first pierce my heart! Who among you will strike it?"

She bowed her head, crying with a piteous tremor of despair:

"Strike! Strike!"

CHAPTER XII.

LOVE OR HATE.

THE sound pierced the hearts of those that loved her, rousing all the chivalry in Aleck Hoover's sterling nature.

"Cap Adair or not," he cried, "I'm fur the man you love!"

And drawing his revolver once more, in defiance of all who might choose to come in hostility, he took his stand before her.

"God bless you!" murmured Pearl, resting her hand on his shoulder.

Indeed, she leaned heavily against his broad back, as if at the point of fainting.

The effect was electric.

"I'm with you ag'in' the world!" shouted a brawny boomer, springing to his side, and standing shoulder to shoulder with him.

"Count me in!"

"An' me! It's a cold day when I git left on Seth Wendover's side, ag'in' Aleck Hoover. Come on, boys! Few or many, we're 'listin' fur the war!"

"Aleck Hoover be blowed! It's Pearl—the Pearl of Oklahoma—we're backin'."

No rallying cry could have been more effective than this. Almost to a man, save Seth's immediate followers, they came over.

"Bear a hand hyar, Mack," said Aleck Hoover, appealing to one of his friends.

And together they lifted Owen to his feet.

"Friends, I am obliged to you," was Owen's acknowledgment; "but, really, I am not so helpless as you seem to think."

"What's your horse—your own, I mean? That was Jimson's you rode into camp wasn't it?"

"Yes. My own is a little way up the river."

"We'll take you to it; an' then I reckon you'll 'low as we've done the squar' thing if we turn you loose to shift fur yourself."

"Leave him to me," interposed Pearl. "Help me to get clear of the camp."

Owen reached out to take Pearl's hand, saying:

"Let me speak to your—"

"If you please!" interrupted Pearl, with her head bowed and her eyes on the ground.

What was this strange coldness in her manner? Did she deliberately avoid letting him take her hand; or was it that she did not see his overture?

Perhaps it was only the reaction from the enforced avowal of her love before that crowd.

Owen was puzzled for a moment. Why was she not proud of her love? Then it occurred to him that she had just discovered his identity.

If that was the trouble, this was no place to make up with her. He would soon have his opportunity. She herself had proposed that he be left to her after the mob was escaped, doubtless with a view to giving an opportunity for explanation and reconciliation.

He had strong faith in the love she had declared so boldly. That would conquer any prejudice she might have conceived.

So he yielded himself to the current of events, and was led out of the crowd, away from the camp, to where his horse was tethered.

Here he was not delayed to restore Jim Jimson's clothes; but mounting his own horse he was accompanied by Pearl riding Jimson's.

The moment he was alone with her he pressed to her side.

"My darling!" he murmured. "Did I do wrong in coming to you? I could not endure to wait any longer. What has kept you from our trysting place?"

"Excuse me, if you please," said the girl, coldly. "We will talk this matter over presently, when we can do so without danger of interruption."

"Pearl!" he cried, his voice ringing with reproach. "Is it possible that you can speak to me in that tone of voice? Have you kept away from me of your own free will? What has happened to estrange you? Is it because I dis-

pointed you once? Do you so easily yield to pique?"

There was a touch of indignation in his last question. He felt badly used, or affected to feel so.

A quiver ran through the girl's figure, but she made no reply.

Hurt by her manner, he submitted. They rode in silence.

Presently Pearl drew rein, as if here she intended to take leave of him.

"I have a question to ask you," she said, speaking with evident difficulty. "I have no doubt that now you will answer me truly."

"It is because I deceived you," said Owen, relieved that her words confirmed his supposition. "But were not you in a measure to blame? Why were you so bitterly prejudiced against me, when you knew nothing at all about me, save by report?"

She did not look at him. She did not heed what he said.

"Will you tell me your name—in full?" she asked.

"You know it," he answered—"Owen Cantwell Adair."

A quiver ran through her.

"Good-by!" she exclaimed, with startling abruptness.

There was a choke in her voice. As if to escape before breaking down completely, she wheeled her horse.

But, her lover was at her side at a bound, with his arms about her.

"Pearl!" he ejaculated, "this is nonsense. What difference does it make who I am? Is it not enough that we love each other? Having seen me, you cannot believe the absurd reports that are circulated against me. Pearl! Pearl!"

He ended with amazed protest.

With the energy of rage the girl was tearing his arms from about her.

"Take your hands off me! Do not dare to touch me!" she panted. "Will you force me to say that I hate you? I do! I do!"

This was not the petulant cry with which she had once before repelled him. The whole energy of the woman was thrown into her bitter words.

At first he was for holding her, as he had done before. But the change in her tones thrilled through him; and when in the struggle she unintentionally struck him in the face, his hands fell suddenly away, leaving her free.

She uttered a cry of dismay, and for a moment cowered breathlessly.

Then her despair stung her to renewed rage; and with a hysterical shrillness in her voice, while tears burst from her eyes, she cried:

"You liar! you coward! you have forced me to this! I will never forgive you! I will—"

But unable to proceed further, she again wheeled her horse and dashed away.

Owen could not lose her so. To him it seemed unaccountable that she should let her prejudices so override every prompting of her heart.

He immediately gave chase, and was soon at her side again.

But, before he could reach her bridle-rein to detain her, she drew sharply away, crying:

"At your peril! I am done with you!"

"Pearl, you are beside yourself. You cannot have done with me," he replied, still persisting in his determination to force her to listen to him. "Have you not just declared your love for me? You belong to me. I refuse to give you up."

"Keep off!" she cried, and to his amazement menaced him with her revolver.

He did not for a moment suppose that, even in the (to him) inexplicable mood that held possession of her, she would use it against him; and in his surprise that she should even threaten him, he did not check his horse.

The animal, used to pursuing the larger game, required no guidance to follow anything of which he was in chase.

The next instant there was an explosion; and Owen felt the thrill of a bullet piercing his flesh.

Instinctively he drew rein, though he still supposed that the shot had been accidental.

A cry of horror burst from Pearl's lips, and the murderous weapon fell from her hand.

She too drew in her horse, and wheeled him so as to bring his head toward Owen.

Then she sat and stared at him, in dumb dismay at her own act.

"It is all right," he said. "I know you did not mean to do it."

The girl did not reply at once, but continued to regard him with that set look of horror.

He still generously sought to relieve her, though he did not approach.

"I know that, whatever your antipathy to me, you would not try to do me serious harm. Let me explain that all I have done has been for love of you, and in order that I might not lose you through your preju—"

With an impatient wave of the hand she cut him short.

"I will not lie to you," she said, "though you have so basely deceived me. I—"

"I deceived you to give you a chance to know me as I am, and not—"

"Will you listen? I might plead that I did not attempt your life—that the weapon went

off in my hand. That would be giving you lie for lie."

"Pearl!" he ejaculated, now horrified as she had been.

"I would kill you rather than feel the touch of your hand again. Will you leave me now?"

He stared at her in incredulity.

She burst into a sudden passion, so fierce that it was plain she was determined to leave nothing unsaid that would drive him from her forever.

"Is it not enough that you have made me loathsome to myself for the rest of my miserable life? Go! go! If I ever pray after this, it will be to call down the curses of Heaven upon you!"

Not a word of relenting! She did not seem to care to know the extent of the wound she had inflicted. It might be mortal, for aught she knew.

Slowly the situation sunk into Owen Adair's mind. The woman he loved had deliberately sought his life. Her hatred for him, without knowing him, was so bitter that it could thus turn her love to wormwood.

She had loved him. He recalled that delicious hour when she had plighted heart and hand. Her kisses, one instant clinging in the abandonment of passion, the next timidly coy; the light of her eye, now melting, now shy, now sportive; her voice, light and bantering, or gliding through the sinuous cadences of tenderness—these marks of love could not have been simulated.

This it was that made the acridity of her resentment. She had been cheated into loving a man she detested. And her resentment had carried her to this extreme—she had sought his life!

With a dull blending of pain and bewilderment, Owen turned away. Slowly he rode, not looking back.

The girl followed him with her eyes; and when he had quite disappeared in the distance, never once looking round, she drew in a deep inhalation, and without a further sound of warning, toppled headlong from her horse's back.

Out of a clear zenith the full moon looked down upon her where she lay, giving no sign of life.

After a startled bound to one side, her horse came back, and gazed at her curiously.

His animal intelligence was not equal to realizing what had happened; and where a dog would have whined with sympathy, his interest soon waned, and he fell to nibbling the grass, patiently waiting for his mistress to require his further services when she needed them.

Hours passed. The moon dipped below the horizon as the sun rose. Two horsemen approached the spot. They had been following the trail since daylight, but at sight of the grazing horse they abandoned the more tedious process, and dashed toward him.

In spite of his anger toward her, Jason Pancoast had been devoured with anxiety for his daughter.

"She's run away with that hound!" he declared. "Why didn't you let me foller him up, and plant him out yon in the prairie?"

"She ain't run off," Seth insisted—"don't you fret. Can't you see that the only chance of her gittin' over this, is to leave her to give him the sack herself? We'll plant him all the same; but she mustn't see our hand in it."

When day broke, however, without her return, Pancoast would be detained no longer.

They found her still where she had fallen.

The slow-moving hours had brought her back to consciousness; but she lay there in a dull apathy.

Even when they rode up, she paid no heed to them. They spoke to her, but she only looked at them vacantly, and closed her eyes.

Seth Wendover had sense enough not to rouse her to be could not guess what outburst of passion by offering to touch her. He left her father to lift her to her feet.

She submitted to whatever he did for her; but instead of replying to him when he spoke, she only sighed, and moved uneasily.

"Put her in the saddle, ef she kin ride," suggested Seth.

This was done; and though she took no interest in directing the horse, she proved able to sit erect.

So she rode back to the camp, never speaking, never so much as lifting her eyes.

"That devil has bewitched her!" growled her father, after he had in vain appealed to her to know whether Owen had offered her any indignity.

"Don't be a fool," protested Seth. "He's treated her all right. You let her go her own gait, an' she'll come out o' this in time, better'n you kin fetch her out by anythin' you kin do."

"I'll have his blood, curse him!" was all that Jason Pancoast answered, in low, rumbling gutturals.

Returned to the camp, Pearl straightway retired to the seclusion of her tilted wagon, there to lie all day with her eyes closed. It was impossible to tell whether she slept or not.

Seth said very little to any one but Jason Pancoast, but on him urged masterly inactivity.

He went away from the camp, no one knew whither. But to himself he was repeating Ada Savoy's recommendation:

"If you want an ally, go to Colonel Flood!"

An ally!—an ally against Owen Adair.

Repeating this to himself, Seth rode away with murder in his heart.

CHAPTER XIII.

COLONEL FLOOD.

SETH WENDOVER was well enough posted to know that all was not harmony in the councils of the Cattle Kings.

Colonel Flood, a Kentuckian, the most violent and reckless of them all, had gathered about him a company of kindred spirits, who needed only a leader to be ready for almost any recourse to retain their hold upon the rich pasture lands they had seized upon, without warrant save the complaisance of the army officers.

It was through his machinations that the odium of certain intrigues in "the Third House" of Congress fell upon Owen Adair. He it was who stood out of sight behind the screen, pulling the wires, while his puppets danced before the public gaze.

All went on very smoothly, till the colonel, finding that he had opponents quite as rascally as himself, and beginning to scent defeat, transferred his talents from the field of diplomacy to—

But let him speak for himself.

"Them hounds air bound to beat us at our own game!" he declared, scorning to gloss his rascally methods before friend or foe. "If we've bought up half o' Congress, they've bought up the other half; and, blank 'em, they've corrupted our half. The thing's goin' through in spite of our teeth, an' these yere beggars will soon be amusing themselves by kicking us off the land. That is to say, they will if we don't mighty soon adopt more stringent measures. The trouble is, we've got a lot o' puling milksops in our crowd that turn faint at the sight of a sore toe. I wish this thing was in old Kaintuck. We'd clean 'em out in short meter!"

Observing the effect of this feeler and others of the same sort, the colonel was not long in picking out the men to whom he could open his mind freely.

Owen Adair showed no sympathy with his suggestion. He had never been quite satisfied with the irregularities at Washington, so much as he knew of them. He would have been less satisfied with the part he had been led to play, if he had known more.

He had been used as a gentlemanly figure-head, while less scrupulous underlings did the dirty work.

When it came to talk of introducing the methods of eastern Kentucky and southern Missouri and Arkansas into the struggle, there was no doubt as to his position.

"Blank his finnikin' gentility!" snarled Colonel Flood, "he's too nice for this wicked world. The question is, air we all to pay for his fiddlin' strictly moral hymn-tunes for our dauncin'? I say that I, for one, am in this thing on business principles. I herd cattle for the money there is in it; an' I propose to grab all the law allows, an' a little more too. I hate an open enemy, but a squeamish friend I do despise! I say this kid-gloved gent is in the way."

"What's the reason we can't go ahead, an' not let him into the thing?" asked Barry McMaster, a henchman of the colonel's.

"He's behind the scene—too near," objected the colonel. "He'd smell us out, sooner or later."

"An' give us away, too!" interjected Barry, with an ugly scowl.

"Remove him—that's the safe way," suggested Con Fretlaw, another of the colonel's choice spirits, who had been eying his master to know when to give utterance to the thought he knew was skulking in his mind.

"Look a-hyere, gentlemen," interposed Rock Beale, a man who was counted "safe," though Flood did not carry him in his breeches pocket. "I can stand a pretty drastic dose. When it comes to layin' out one o' these infernal tramps, I'm with ye. But Adair is a gentleman and a scholar, a white man through an' through. He's one of our crowd, an' an ornamental one, too, as well as useful. He ropes in these brocaded army officers in a way that is jest lovely. We don't want to play it so low down on Adair, I tell you."

"Oh, Con means all right," was the colonel's assurance. "He wouldn't hurt a hair of his head. No more would I. But if he was to take a trip a little further West—for his health, say—it would be money in your pocket, and in mine, too."

"What do you propose to do with him?" asked Beale.

"Nothing," answered the colonel, carelessly, "only pray the Lord, if it is consistent with His all-wise purposes, to translate him to a wider sphere of usefulness."

"Do you fancy your prayer is likely to be answered?"

"I don't know. I never tried."

There the matter dropped for the time; but, some time later, when he was alone with Beale, the colonel took occasion to ask:

"I suppose, if Adair was to get promoted by a mob o' these byere tramps, you would be willing to join in avenging him, while you mourned his loss?"

"I would so," replied Beale, his answer really implying that he would institute no over-nice inquisition beneath surface appearances, if some day Owen was a victim seemingly to the violence of the common enemy.

"He might be spirited off, an' no further harm come to him," suggested Flood. "I have nothin' against him myself. I'd fight for him as soon as for anybody I know."

This was the state of things when Seth Wendover presented himself to Colonel Flood.

The colonel received him with rather pompous condescension.

"Well, sir! whom have I the honor to serve?"

Now, while this address made Seth in a measure ill at ease, yet he generally considered himself as good as another; and, instead of causing him to truckle, it roused his dogged defiance.

"That jest depends," he replied, with a swagger. "The question is, whether I've found the man I'm lookin' after."

"May I ask who that is?"

"I hain't no perlite way o' sayin' what I mean. I hate beatin' about the bush—"

"You needn't beat about the bush with me; and I'll only trouble you for the ordinary courtesy one gentleman accords another."

"Waal, then, I'm lookin' fur a man what hates Cap Adair like pison!"

"O—o—oh!" breathed the colonel, suddenly contracting his eyes.

Without break, he added:

"A particular friend of mine."

"Cap Adair is?"

"Certainly. I knew his father before him; and, father and son, have known nothing but good of them."

"Be you lyin' to me, pardner?"

"Eh! I beg your pardon! Did I understand you?"

"You're standin' me off."

"That is better. I understand you to retract your former implication?"

"You beat me at slingin' the Dictionary, boss. Ef you can't talk United States, we'll have to throw up the job."

"You said something about a lie. Do you understand that?"

"That's plain enough."

"Well, you probably know what an apology is, if not a retraction."

"Oh, you want me to take it back?"

"It is a matter of indifference to me. I am quite out of practice with these instruments, and would as lieve keep my hand in on you as on any one else."

And the colonel politely tendered Seth one of his revolvers, appending:

"Unless you prefer to use your own."

"Look a-hyere, boss," said Seth, not offering to accept the weapon. "I didn't come hyer to quarrel with you. Ef I had, you bet your sweet life we wouldn't have had so many words about it. Ef your stomach is so blamed squeamish, I'm willin' to take the lie back, an' git right down to business."

"Very well, sir. Let us hear your business."

"You hate Owen Adair, an' so do I. The question is, air you willin' to down him? Ef you don't want to put your own hand to it, will you tell me how the thing is to be done? What I stand fur, is that my tracks must be covered up too."

"Who are you?"

"Waal, ef I hadn't come prepared to tell you that, o' course I wouldn't be hyer."

"Certainly not. Go ahead, sir."

"I am Seth Wendover."

"For all purposes of identification, you might as well be John Smith."

"Give me time. I'm comin' down to bed rock before I quit. You know Jase Pancoast?"

"Ah! Jason Pancoast? I have the honor to have heard of him."

"Waal, I'm his right bower."

"Seth Wendover, the subordinate of Jason Pancoast. Very good."

"I might as well let you into the straight o' this thing so's thar won't be no no blunderin' in the dark. Jase he's got a daughter what I'm after. Cap Adair has cut in an' scooped me higher'n a kite. Thar ain't no goin' back on that. Yer humble sarvant ain't nowhar."

"Oh! Adair has got after a boomer's daughter? So much the worse for her."

"Hold on, boss. He's on the squar—that's the worst of it. Ef he wasn't, I could shoot him, an' have the thing over an' done with."

Colonel Flood bowed assent, but smiled incredulously.

"The point is, you want to get rid of Adair, and are willing to do it in any way that will not compromise you with this rustic beauty?"

"That's puttin' it in better shape'n I could put it myself."

"Where is this boomer and his pretty daughter?"

"Hold on, Cap! You don't want to give that away."

"Ah! In hiding?"

"I didn't say so."

"Adair must know."

"He ain't like to give it away, if he does."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Sure of it! I'm sure he's dead gone on the girl."

"And she on him?"

"Waal, thar's been a mite of a fallin' out between 'em, an' that's a fact."

And Seth told the story of Owen's courtship, adding:

"But that kin be easy made up, ef he don't drop out between two days. That's the reason I've come to you jest at this time."

"By the way, how did you happen to think of me?"

Seth hesitated a moment. But he owed Ada nothing, and he was the kind of a man who would sell anybody out for his own advantage.

"I was put on to you by one o' your partic'lar friends."

"Indeed! I have friends, then? But this one?"

"A woman visitin' at Fort Reno."

"Miss Browning? Impossible!"

"Not her. The citified woman with her."

"Miss Savoy?"

"That's the one."

"But what did she say to you?"

"When you want a backer ag'in' Cap Adair, call on Colonel Flood."

"Hm! Hm! She must be observing."

"She's got you down fine, boss."

"And her interest in the matter?"

"She's gone on Adair herself—"

"And our rustic beauty has supplanted her! Is it possible? I should like to see what this backwoods belle looks like. She must be a beauty indeed."

"You may bet your boots on it, boss. But jest you keep yer hands off. Be you goin' to help me to bounce Cap Adair; or baint you?"

"You will get your answer in the course of our conversation. Does your affection for the daughter extend to the father?"

"Eh! I don't drop to you, boss."

"To get the girl you wish to dispose of Adair. Now, suppose it were necessary, in getting rid of Adair, to first sacrifice old man Pancoast. Would you do it?"

"Go back on my pard!"

"Not only that. Would you balk your whole company, and give up even such a foothold as you yourself have in Oklahoma?"

"Burn my own fingers! What do you take me fur?"

"A man very much in love. A man bound to have the woman he has set his heart upon, no matter what it costs."

"I am so, pardner—ef thar's blood in it!"

"Blood!—somebody's else blood! But are you willing to sacrifice your own pocket—your property interests?"

Seth dropped his jaw.

"Bah, man!" scoffed the colonel. "What is it worth, after all? Haven't you had experience enough in the hopelessness of your senseless raids? You know well enough that the scouts will smell you out sooner or later; and then good-by to your claims."

"Smell us out? Let 'em do it! I tell you thar'll be blood come o' this, before you snoozers rout us out o' land that we've got as good a right to as you have—an' a blame sight better!"

"Right! Pish! Right has gone West! Are you in your cradle yet? Have you come to me to be told that it is money and brains that run this world? I'm not the puling rascal to cloak a clever swindle with a cowardly lie; so proclaim openly that we buy our right—as you call it—to what we hold, money down! And as long as we've got the ready to plank, we'll hold on to all we've got. When you can outbid us, then it will be time to talk. That's business."

"But we'll pit our powder an' lead ag'in' your money!"

"In welcome! A generous Government supplies us with soldiers, whom we turn over to you to practice upon. It will be amusement for us to watch the fight, over our cigars and wine."

"You git away with me in chin-music, boss."

"We shall get away with you in everything. It is only a question of time—and money. Meanwhile, what's the use of your playing a losing game?—you individually, I mean. The quarter section you've got your eye on—"

"I've got my foot on it, boss!"

"Very well. It isn't worth a rap. You can't keep your foot on it. Now, what's the reason you shouldn't turn an honest penny, and get your revenge and your sweetheart, all at the same time?"

"How kin I do it?"

"Put the soldiers onto a certain boomers' camp, and have them run out—"

"No, by—"

"Hold on! Who will be supposed to have given information? Who but Owen Adair? Didn't he penetrate to your camp? Didn't he get away with no particular love for the lot of you? Having broken with the girl, his one reason for silence, will it be hard to persuade such fellows as you are that his first thought was likely to be revenge? Come, come! the thing is made to your hand. You still want this girl, don't you?"

"I'll have her, if I have to wade in blood to git her!"

"Of course you will. And you have a nice little company of backers, I'll venture to say."

"I've got a crowd what will stand by me."

"Through thick or thin?"

"You bet."

"And not particularly squeamish as to what you have for them to do?"

"They don't gag at nothin', ef I give the word."

"Provided you can satisfy them that it will pay."

"Waal, they ain't in this world fur nothin'. Thanks 'ud starve a cat."

"Exactly. Well, now, these are just the sort of fellows you want to help you get the girl you're after, and to get rid of your rival at the same time. To begin with, you might as well give up the idea of trying to coax her into an affection for you."

"If we're once shut o' Cap—"

"Nonsense! You don't believe that, even while you say it. The girl has rejected you for Adair. I ask you, in all honesty, if you think that she is likely to turn from such a fellow as he to such a fellow as you? Come, now! put your vanity into your pocket. We're talking business. We have an end to accomplish. And to accomplish that end we have got to look facts in the face, whether we like it or not. According to your story, this quarrel is nothing. The girl is as much in love with Adair now as ever. It is her very love that makes her so fierce. If you get her at all, you will have to do it by playing upon this passion. I believe you can get her through it. But if that fails, you certainly can't get her in any other way. Will you take her so?"

"I'll take her any way I kin git her!"

"Very well. Listen to what I propose."

CHAPTER XIV.

AN OPENING PLOT.

WHATEVER Colonel Flood's plot, Seth Wendover rode away from his interview with the fire-eating Cattle King with a look of dogged determination and reckless defiance on his face, and in his general manner the swagger of a man who had sold himself to the devil.

That night passed as usual with the boomers, but the camp was roused in the morning by a gun-shot, and those earliest astir were startled by the sight of the sentinel running in from his post in a great state of excitement.

It was just at the break of dawn, the hour of all hours for a surprise.

"The soldiers! the soldiers!" shouted the sentinel.

In a moment all was in wildest confusion, in the midst of which Jason Pancoast appeared in his trousers and boots, with, of course, his never-failing revolvers strapped about his waist.

His stentorian voice made itself heard in every part of the camp, and soon his rapid orders had brought order out of chaos.

Like well-drilled soldiers his men sprung to their posts, and forming a line along the threatened side of their camp, presented a very creditable front to the enemy.

Warned off by this hostile array, Major Browning halted his men, and rode forward alone for a parley.

Jason Pancoast strode forth to meet him, his rifle resting in the hollow of his arm.

Just at that moment he was not of very prepossessing appearance.

The disorder of his dress consisted in nothing save the absence of his hat; for he as often went about without a coat as with one. Yet there was an indescribable something about him which marked a man hastily roused from his bed; and the black frown on his face seemed to indicate that he had awakened to no beneficent office.

Major Browning saluted him with soldier-like formality; a courtesy which he acknowledged with only a churlish grunt.

"I have the honor to address Captain Pancoast?"

"That's my name, stranger."

"It is my duty to look into the legality of your presence in this Territory—you and the men under you."

"I hain't no papers, stranger, only gun-wad-din'."

"It then becomes my duty to escort you and your company back over the border."

"I reckon I'll see how many men you've got to do it with. They may be as good as mine, man fur man; but they ain't a blame sight better."

"Of course you will recognize the folly of any attempt at resistance. I wish to show you every courtesy and consideration; but it is needless to remind you that whatever force is needed to dislodge you will be brought against you, if you conclude to try so hopeless an experiment."

"Will you tell me who has give us away?"

"That is no part of my office. I am acting under orders. My duty begins and ends with looking after your trespass. For anything further, you have, of course, the privilege of addressing yourself to headquarters."

Jason Pancoast growled out something not al-

together complimentary to the source of authority indicated, which Major Browning wisely ignored.

Of course there was really nothing to be said. Once detected, he could not array himself against the force of the whole United States.

So the boomer chieftain ate his humble-pie with what grace he could.

"I reckon you'll give me time to talk this over with my men," he said.

Of course Major Browning knew that he was only letting himself down easy.

"You will be permitted a reasonable time to prepare to move," he answered.

"We may make it up amongst us to take a stand, an' fight it out on this line. I reckon your pets an' their backers in Congress won't hark to nothin' but rifle-shots in the end. A poor man is a dog in this country. We can't wine you, an' we can't dine you, but we kin let some blame bad blood out o' you one o' these days!"

"You will not be disturbed before noon; but at one o'clock I expect you to be ready to start," answered the soldier, with unperturbed dignity.

With an inarticulate growl, the boomer chieftain turned on his heel and went back to his men.

The council that followed consisted chiefly of execrations, about equally distributed among the cattle kings, our country's venal statesmen, and the spy who had betrayed the camp.

That this last was Owen Adair, no one for a moment questioned.

"I want every man hyar to swear to shoot the cuss on sight!" growled Jason Pancoast.

The response was quite general, though informal. No one regarded it as a pledge. It was only an expression of hatred.

"We'd orter fixed him while we had him in hand, an' all this hyar would 'a' been spared," said Jake Sharp. "You wouldn't listen to me. Waal, you've got it in your soup, that's all!"

"Thar's a snivelin' crowd in this hyar camp what orter 'a' been cleaned out long ago," growled Seth, with an evil eye on Aleck Hoover. "Who's goin' to squar' with me fur the land I'm euchered out of? Blast my hide ef I don't git even with somebody, first or last!"

Now, Aleck Hoover had no particular relish for a personal encounter with Seth Wendover. Yet he was not a man who would submit to be openly badgered.

"Ef that means me," he retorted, "I always pay my debts. What I done, I done, an' I'm ready to stand by it. The man don't stand in shoe-leather to say as I bear any love to Cap Adair, without gettin' the lie in his teeth. But I'm backin' the one as I did back, while wood grows an' water runs; an' ef ary man 'lows as I owe him anythin' fur that, he kin step up an' git his small change whenever it's most convenient fur him."

"Blast you!" growled Seth, "whar'd we be now, but fur you?"

This challenge was like a clarion-blast of war, or, to lower the figure, like the snarling of one dog in a group.

Instantly Seth's usual backers showed signs of aggression. Not only did they emulate their leader in scowling blackly at Aleck Hoover and the men who were presumably his friends; but by a concerted movement they began to separate from the miscellaneous crowd, and gather about their chief.

But in the impending quarrel be it not forgotten that Aleck represented the cause of Pearl; and it is therefore not strange that the hostility to him roused a counter spirit in those who had sided with him on the day before.

Without a rallying cry the two factions fell apart; and weapons leaped into view as if by magic.

But just as bloodshed was imminent a figure flashed between the two parties.

It was Pearl, yet so changed that one would scarcely recognize her.

She who had been the picture of blooming health was now pale, with a flaming spot of color in either cheek, and eyes unnaturally brilliant.

"Stop!" she cried. "Is it not bad enough, but we must fall out among ourselves? I alone am responsible for what has happened. If in any way you could better matters by sacrificing me, I would offer myself to your revenge. But can any good come of your playing into the hands of our enemies, by completing your destruction through internal strife? I beg of you to give over this madness, join hands anew, and fight them till justice is secured. If the opportunity ever offers for me to repair my error, you may depend that no personal feeling will stand in the way of my embracing it. If ever again one of these conscienceless scoundrels falls into your hands, I shall not be the one to deter you from meting out to him his just deserts."

Much more she said in that hurried address; but it mattered little what she said, so long as she gave Seth an excuse for backing out of the conflict he had provoked.

He had had no intention of precipitating a quarrel. His only purpose was to divert suspicion from himself by appearing outraged.

Sulkily enough, in appearance, he called off his bull-dogs; and of course Aleck had no wish for strife.

Altogether it was not an enviable company that prepared to break camp at one o'clock.

Escorted by the soldiers, whose leader prevented more than one outbreak between them and the chagrined boomers, Jason Pancoast and his men withdrew from the prohibited territory, till they stood once more on the soil of Kansas.

Then followed days of smoldering hatred, in which it required all of Jason Pancoast's tact and authority to keep his company together.

Many who had sprung so promptly to Pearl's aid were now dissatisfied with themselves, and with Aleck Hoover for his appeal to them.

If Pearl had been her old self, she might have won them over by her bright presence. But she was now invisible within her tilted wagon, or when she appeared for brief moments was so dejected as to cast a gloom over all who saw her. Those who were strongest in their old allegiance were bitterest against Owen Adair, the cause of all her unhappiness.

Seth Wendover left the camp with a squad of his most trusted henchmen. It was supposed by those not in the secret of his movements, that he was engaged in making provision for their living while they waited for the opening of the Territory, or for a more promising chance to raid it again.

Clear of the camp, however, he revealed himself to the men he had chosen.

"Boys, I've picked you out because I 'lowed as you wasn't blame fools, an' could listen to reason when you hyeared it. I've been thinkin' this hyar thing over sence we first laid ourselves out fur to buck ag'in' the cattle kings an' their money, an' I reckon some o' the rest o' you has gone over the same ground, each in his own way."

"Now I'm 'lowin' to give you what I make o' the thing, an' give it to ye short an' sweet; an' hyar you have it—it's all blame rot! We've been 'lowin' as all a squatter had to do was to ketch on an' hang on. Waal, that thing goes sometimes, when ye only got the sheriff to reckon with; but when it's soldiers, it's a boss of another color. I tell you, an' you kin believe me or not, that nobody don't go into Oklahoma, an' stay thar, till the President says we kin! Then whar's the use o' this hyar raidin'? You hyear me!—we're foolin' away our time!"

"Ef we've got to wait, then whar's to hinder our usin' the time to put a few gilders in our pockets?"

"The want of a chance," spoke up one of his men.

"Ef I give you the chance, how many is fur standin' by me through thick an' thin?"

The form of his question put them at a stand.

"Is it road-agentin'?" asked the same ready speaker, with a grin.

"It ain't road-agentin'. But what if it was? Would you go in fur it?"

"Waal, I never tried my hand that way. But somethin's got to be did, an' that mighty sudden."

"It ain't road-agentin'; but thar may be a loud call fur Judge Lynch in it before we git through."

"Nothin' venture, nothin' have!"

"So say you, all of you?"

There was a tolerably general assent, though some hung back.

"It's to git square with Cap Adair; an' we're to have mighty tall backin'. What do you say to that?"

There was no doubtful sound in their hearty response now. One and all were eager to "git square with Cap Adair."

"Thar ain't all," pursued Seth. "Suppose you have to cut loose from Cap Pancoast?"

"Ef we tie to a better leader'n him, why not?" asked Jake Sharp.

"You tie to me, ef that'll do ye," said Seth.

"That's good enough fur me," answered Jake.

"I only speak fur one."

"Me fur another," broke in Jim Jimson, who was of the party.

"Cap Pancoast never kept us in much more'n grub—"

"An' mighty sllm pickin's at that!"

There was a general chorus of discontent with the results of Pancoast's leadership.

"Then who goes in with me, make or break?" cried Seth, his vanity hugely puffed up at the prospect of independent authority.

"What is thar in it?" demanded Larry o' Lar-amie.

"Fifty dollars down, an' maybe more, ef we come out all right."

"Done, fur one!"

From this prompt response the others took their cue, and the enthusiasm waxed in a way very flattering to Seth.

"Whoop 'er up, boys, fur Cap Wendover!" shouted Jake Sharp.

And the air wrung with their cheers.

"I'm obliged to you, pards!" said Seth, flushed with pleasure. "I'll do the best I kin by you always. But we don't go into this thing without pldges, ye onderstand. One squealer might make some ugly work fur the rest."

"Fast bind, fast find!" quoted Sharp. "While you're about it, you might as well clinch it as tight as if it was road-agentin'. That'll leave us

margin to circulate in, 'an' it won't hurt to have it, even if we don't want to use it."

Seth presented his bowie-knife.

"Swear on this," he said. "This tells its own story."

And each one knew that he forfeited his life in case of treachery.

Then Seth opened his plan to them, the plot Colonel Flood had conceived.

CHAPTER XV.

A TRANSFER OF ALLEGIANCE.

THE flight of the unhappy Ada Savoy from the scene of her great humiliation was as nearly frantic as could well be.

What might have been its termination, had she been left to herself, it were impossible to say. In such a mood an accidental suggestion might have led to suicide.

But Owen pursued till he overtook her, when she was overcome by a paroxysm of wild weeping.

Nothing could have been better. When she had wept to exhaustion, the storm of emotion was allayed. The apathy that followed left no cause for immediate apprehension.

Accompanying her to within sight of the Fort, Owen left her to run the gantlet of prying curiosity alone.

Of course she could do this best unaccompanied. A veil baffled the soldiers whom she had to pass; and her friends were considerate enough not to intercept her on her way to her room.

After a day during which the plea of a headache explained her non-appearance, she came forth from her seclusion, looking exceedingly pale, yet making a brave effort to resume her old life.

Now elf Ethel had a chance to show her tact and kindness of heart.

Ignoring those few days in which she had been shut out from her friend's confidence, she set herself to divert Ada from the pain which so evidently overshadowed her.

In this she was gladly assisted by Carl Berkhardt, who devoted himself to her so assiduously that he who ran might read his "intentions."

Outwardly the old gayety was resumed; only Ethel had to keep on the lookout for periods of blank abstraction which fell over her friend.

Then the delicate ingenuity with which she called a wan smile of interest to Ada's lips, won for herself golden tributes of admiration from her devoted slave, Berkhardt.

So came the day when Owen Adair rode away from his estranged love with a heart that felt like a stone in his breast.

The woman for whom he would willingly have laid down his life, if her welfare had demanded the sacrifice, had deliberately tried to take it with her own hand.

"A woman? A she-wolf!" he said to himself, in a throe of indignant resentment. "It is her savage jealousy coupled with her senseless prejudice. She thinks that, because I broke tryst with her, it must be through the allurements of her rival; and when she learns who I am, that settles the matter. She will not listen to a word of explanation. Lies! lies! lies!"

He mimicked her fierce repudiation, and then ground his teeth with pain.

"Her original hatred of me would not have driven her to such lengths. That makes her willing to believe any ill of me; but it is her tigerish jealousy that would make her a murderer."

He balked on the word "murderess." The throe of pain it cost him forced the tears into his eyes.

The more rugged races account it unmanly to shed tears over physical suffering; but the softest heart may melt without loss of dignity over some wound of the spirit.

However, no tears fell from Owen Adair's eyes. They became humid; but the fire of his resentment seemed to burn them dry again.

"A fool—a confounded fool from the first!" was his bitter self-accusation. "What did I know about her? At a glance of passion and an outburst of jealousy, I cast myself at her feet; I am ready to risk life—worse!—the whole peace of my life! To think of it! The very first profession of love was a tirade of jealous suspicion! It serves me right! I ought to be pilloried with a fool's cap, for the whole world to laugh at!"

Then there arose in his imagination a contrasting picture.

"She loved me, and I scorned her!" he said, recalling the look in Ada Savoy's eyes when she first gazed at him with her lips glowing with his first and only kiss.

It was perhaps natural that he dropped something out of view in both pictures.

Had not there been moments when Pearl charmed him with glances of pure tenderness? Had not the lightnings of Ada's scorn rivaled Pearl's bitterest invective?

But a sore heart is apt to play us queer tricks. We often remember only what falls in with our mood.

It was at this critical moment that Owen Adair, riding aimlessly about the prairie till broad daylight, fleeing the demons of thought, emerged from a chaparral upon the open plain,

to come face to face with a cavalcade skimming the prairie in the gayest spirits.

His first impulse was to shun this party so out of harmony with his mood. But it was too late. He was seen and recognized. Carl Berkhardt greeted him with a shout. In a moment more he was surrounded.

"Well met! well met, old fellow! We were wanting just one more to complete our party; and the gods have sent us the best at their command."

Berkhardt had his friend by the hand, and glanced significantly from him to Ada Savoy.

"I'll bet a little something that I can see as far into a grindstone as some others!" he was flattering himself. "If Adair can't bring her ladyship back to earth, from those dreamy flights of hers, then nobody can, according to my notion."

He glanced at Ethel, for approval of his cleverness.

He encountered a look of dismay and indignant condemnation.

"Was there ever such a stupid?" she was saying to herself. "As if it were not unlucky enough to run pell-mell into him like this! 'There is a destiny that shapes our ends rough,' as the immortal Mark bath it. At any rate, she will have a chance to show him that she isn't wearing the willow. I wish I could stand in her shoes for one blessed hour. I'd show him a thing or two. But that addeled fellow of mine! I have a mind to cut his acquaintance."

"Eh?" ejaculated Carl, looking at her inquiringly.

She turned away from him, and greeted Owen as if she were as charmed as Carl over his appearance.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Adair. We were just wishing that you were of the party. We are having such a glorious time. Only we insist on your riding something a little more civilized than a broncho in his primitive state."

"Speaking of bronchos," interpose Berkhardt, "you haven't got over that last dash on the Lightning Express. You'll have to treat yourself a little better. Eh? By Jove! what's this? You have been hurt! I thought you were looking unusual white."

"It is nothing," answered Owen, impatiently drawing his hand away.

"But, my dear fellow!" expostulated Berkhardt.

"You won't make much of a ranchero if you cry over every little drop of blood," said Owen, with a laugh.

Then, thrusting into his coat the hand from which the blood was dripping, he lifted his hat with the other, and with a touch of the spur goaded his horse up to Ada, who had dropped her eyes, and sat with white lips and palpitating heart, awaiting his greeting.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Miss Ada," he said, in his old cordial manner.

The girl lifted her eyes, and saw something in his that sent the blood back to her cheeks and lips.

"It is mutual," she responded.

And so wonderful is the self-control of woman when brought to bay, that she smiled radiantly.

A single glance at her, and Ethel took her cue.

"Forward!" she cried. "We have no time for civilities. We are to be on the crest of that butte when the sun crosses the meridian, Mr. Adair, or I lose a box of gloves."

"Hold on!" interposed Berkhardt, with a laugh. "That isn't a full stop, but only a comma."

"I don't understand you, sir," said Ethel, with a reproving glance at her escort.

But Carl was in too gay spirits to be repressed.

"You have omitted a clause beginning with the co-ordinate conjunction."

"I leave you to the niceties of grammar," responded Ethel, with a toss of her head. "My education was always defective in that branch."

"Let me repair the deficiency as we go along," proposed Carl.

"I think it better to give your attention to your horse. It will serve you right if he unseats you."

And taking the lead, she waved her hand to the others to follow.

In a moment they were strung out in a double line, each lady having an escort at her side.

It was not difficult, and it was in full accord with Ethel's intentions, for Owen and Ada to fetch up the rear.

"What was the matter? Did I put my foot into it in some unaccountable way?" asked Berkhardt, in a tone which showed that he and Ethel were approaching a significant confidential understanding.

"Your foot!" scoffed Ethel. Make it both feet. And such feet!"

"But what could be nicer than to bring them together again, and in that accidental way? I thought you said—"

"I never said anything!"

"Well, I must have guessed it, then."

"I think you did."

"But aren't you glad the thing came about?"

"No. I'm furious."

"What? And you smiled on him like an angel?"

"Don't I smile on everybody like an angel?"

"On everybody but me."

"I could bite you, you're so stupid."

"But just look at them. They're—"

"Don't you dare to look round. I forbid you, sir! I'll never speak to you again!"

"I'd rather be turned into a pillar of salt!" laughed Carl, who was not greatly dismayed by her threats.

Meanwhile Owen Adair and Ada Savoy were trying to affect an ease which neither of them felt.

They talked of everything in sight, just as the others did, with the same conventional words of enthusiastic admiration and enjoyment.

But when they got among the hills, how was it that they lagged so far behind, and finally got off the trail altogether?

At first Ada was nervously anxious to keep near her companions; but when it became apparent that Owen wished otherwise she gradually yielded, the color coming and going in her cheeks, and her furtive glances seeking his face inquiringly.

Which of them was it that first drew rein? It was in the midst of a chaparral. They could hear the voices of their companions, and the sharp clang of the horses' hoofs, from time to time, as they toiled up the steep; but they could see no one, and could not be seen.

They sat their horses face to face, looking into each other's eyes.

There was a burning light in Owen's eyes which Ada had never seen there before, not even when he openly admired her at the beginning of their acquaintance—before his meeting with Pearl.

It made the girl's heart flutter in her bosom like a captive bird.

"Well?" uttered Owen, at last.

She gave a start, as if his voice had broken some spell.

"We seem to have lost the path," she ventured, almost in a whisper. "Haven't we better rejoin the others?"

She did not seem to feel the inconsistency of her observation, and the question that immediately followed it.

"Had we better?" asked Owen, in a voice that thrilled her again.

"Haven't we?" she repeated, helplessly.

With a touch of the spur he forced his horse a step forward, so as to bring himself close to her side.

"Ada!" he uttered, bending toward her.

"Oh, no! no! no!" she panted, drawing away from him in sudden trepidation.

Then, recovering herself with a strong effort:

"You have no right to speak to me like this! Let us go at once."

"I do not deserve the privilege of speaking to you like this," amended Owen, gravely. "I have been a blind fool."

He came to an embarrassed pause, as if at a loss for words in which to clothe his feelings. But his eyes spoke an appeal over which his lips faltered.

The girl flushed scarlet, then turned as pale as death. Up to her heart went her hand, and she fairly reeled in her seat.

"Ada!" he cried.

And at a bound he was out of the saddle and at her side.

"No! no! no!" she protested, struggling to free herself from the supporting arm he threw about her. "Do not touch me! You have no right! you have no right!"

"Only you can give me the right!" he pleaded. "Listen! You cast your pearls before swine. But my punishment has been swift and effective. I have come to my senses. I never should have known what love—a true woman's love—was really worth, if this had not happened. But I do know now. And must I lose it just as I have learned its value? Ada, you are heart-sore. So am I. Can you, with your own suffering so recent, condemn me to the like for one moment of fatal blindness?"

The girl had ceased to struggle. It seemed as if she were on the point of sinking into his arms from sheer weakness.

But still she strove to maintain her womanly dignity. Her pride was not so utterly crushed that she would welcome him under any condition.

"You chose with your eyes open," she urged.

"You preferred another. Go to her! You belong to her, not to me!"

But there was a sob in her voice which pre-saged submission in the end.

"Do not mention her!" said Owen, bitterly, almost with a shudder. "I must have been mad. I have reaped the fruit of my infatuation. I have come to you for—for—"

"Consolation! You have quarreled with her?"

"I will not deceive you! Have not I always been frank? She attempted my life scarcely an hour ago!"

"And you—you—"

The girl choked with sudden rage, but recovering with a fierce effort, went on:

"You would make me the instrument of your pique! You are a famous lover! Your gallantry is equaled only by your discretion!"

And she burst into a hysterical laugh.

"I have not sought to be wise nor polite, but only truthful," he pleaded, humbly. "Ada,

you have loved; you still love; and love forgives everything."

"Everything to love," she admitted. "But do you fancy, whatever my infatuation, that it is so besotted that I would consent to save your wounded vanity? You chose with your eyes open!"

But, despite her insistence, there was a ring in her voice which betrayed the anguish his choice still caused her.

"And do you think that it is only hurt vanity with me?" he asked, with his sad eyes on hers.

Of a sudden she broke down. Love conquered all else. With an inarticulate cry of passion, she threw her arms about his neck.

"Kill me," she cried, "if this is a dream like the other! Never let me wake from it! Oh, my love! my love! my love!"

"You never shall!" he promised her, scarcely permitted to breathe for her kisses.

In that moment he told himself that he was a happy man—a deliriously happy one, he put it. But why did he keep saying it again and again, even indignantly, as if protesting against a derisive smile of incredulity? What was that fine thread of pain with which his intoxication seemed intershot?

Ada Savoy was not a girl to give herself by halves. Any spectator would have thought that Owen had good reason for being satisfied with the award of fate.

So radiant was his face, so ardent his protestations, that Ada was satisfied that all her heart craved was hers.

With a man's clumsiness, he sought to explain further; but she stopped his lips in a way that fond lovers know.

"Not another word of *her*, now or ever!" she insisted, in a way that reminded him of that scene with Pearl when she had expressed the same sentiment in almost the identical words. "Let us turn down that page in our existence. I shall always believe it was only an ugly dream. But, haven't we been long enough away from the others? Oh, my darling!" suddenly clasping him again to her, "it is one of the sacrifices we must constantly make to the world, till—till—the world gives us leave to forget it! But we shall have to tell them. I can't hide the change in me—I don't want to hide it—and they will expect an explanation."

"They shall have it," answered Owen. "They can't be half so curious as I am eager to proclaim my good fortune to gods and men."

They laughed delightedly into each other's eyes, and honestly thought that their love was complete.

It was "catching a heart in the rebound,"—a dangerous game always.

"I claim your congratulations!" cried Owen, as they overtook their companions.

"Oh, you treasure!" ejaculated Ethel, almost dragging Ada and herself out of their saddles in the exuberance of her delight.

The others were profuse enough in their congratulations, after which they managed to leave the lovers to their happiness as much as possible.

"Oho!" chuckled Carl Berkhardt, when he got Miss Ethel by herself, "the astuteness of the female mind—what do they call it?—intuition—as compared to the clumsiness of a horrid man, in matters of the heart!"

"That will do, sir, if you please! Do you believe in signs, the unlucky number thirteen, presentiments, spilling of salt, etc., or do you leave such foolish philosophy to the weakness of the female mind, with your lordly explanation of coincidences?"

"Do you mean to rob me of my meed of praise? Do you call this a lucky accident? I brought them together with a grace that banished all awkwardness, and fairly greased the way to an understanding between them; you called me a bungler and a marplot for my pains. Lo! fate decides between us; and you scoff coincidence! Young lady, when I have a legal right to whip you with a gad as big as my thumb—good English Common Law, you know—I'll have a sweet revenge!"

"When you have the right? If you have the right!"

All of which shows that Berkhardt was putting in his time to some purpose.

Never was there a gayer party than that which suddenly came upon Colonel Flood.

To none of them all was his greeting so markedly deferential as to Ada Savoy. But as he lifted his head after bending over her hand, his eyes sought hers with a smile of irony.

The girl started, flushed painfully, and then turned as pale as death.

Why did she draw so near to Owen's side after that? Why did she hover about him? Why did her eyes rest upon him with mingled deprecation and anxiety?

The colonel was unusually jocular. He did not look at her. All felt that the Kentuckian was a pleasant companion when his mood was not crossed.

Suspecting nothing, Ethel accepted his invitation on behalf of the others with great enthusiasm.

"The very thing! I, for one, have been just dying to see those famous horses of old Kaintuck! Would you believe it, when I have been your neighbor so long without going to see?"

"I am prepared to believe anything pleasant of Major Browning's charming sister," responded the colonel, with his most elaborate bow.

"But you never invited me, you know," pleaded Ethel, in extenuation.

"From diffidence, believe me!" said the colonel.

"Oh, you are too bad!" laughed Ethel, blushing a little, however, with pleasure.

"I appeal to Miss Savoy. She knows the world, and must have discovered the signs of modesty in me."

The gallant colonel turned his smile upon Ada. His slow eyes thrilled her with their sinister irony.

Ethel wondered at seeing her flush and then turn pale.

"I have thought Colonel Flood a gentleman of the old school," she said.

What was there so uncertain, almost pleading, in her voice?

"My vanity ought to be sated with so pretty a compliment," he said. "Should I forfeit the title by asking you what virtues I must cultivate to merit its continuance?"

"Courage and—and magnanimity, I believe, were among the characteristics of that exemplar."

The girl lifted her eyes to his face, hung a moment breathlessly in his gaze, and then dropped them again.

She had tried to answer lightly. Her words were well enough, but her voice and manner puzzled Ethel.

"What has she against the colonel?" she asked herself. "I think him just splendid!"

She did not see the expression of the colonel's eyes as he answered:

"Eh! I thought I had an easier task than that. I had an impression that what would be chiefly required of me, to sustain the character, was admiration of the ladies."

Ada struggled to prevent her companions from seeing the shiver that ran through her at these apparently simple words.

She was greatly relieved when Owen Adair interposed with:

"Come, come, colonel! you're an old sinner! I hadn't thought it necessary to look after you; but I begin to think that you will bear watching."

"If all your friends would bear it so well, my boy— But there! Modesty bids me forbear."

They all laughed, Ada smiling wanly, and in the babel of badinage that was showered on the colonel, attention was diverted from her.

As if to escape the merry assault, Colonel Flood spurred his horse into a run, to stop only when he stood, hat in hand, to welcome them to his humble roof-tree, as he called it.

He treated his guests to a bountiful dinner, with good wine at the finish, and cigars for the devotees of "the weed." Then he showed them about the place, parading his blooded horses with evident pride.

"Oh, we must have a race!" cried Ethel. "I will bet on that beautiful creature!"

"Without first seeing her put through her paces, Miss Ethel?"

"For shame! To doubt such a paragon of her kind! I take her on trust."

"Do you take people on trust in the same way?"

"Why, of course!"

"And you are never disappointed?"

"In my friends? Never! They are all—delightful!"

"Not *equally* delightful!" whispered Berkhardt in her ear.

He was rewarded with a peremptory:

"Hush!"

And, strange to say, he appeared quite well content with what he got for his pains.

"You are to be envied," said the colonel. "I myself have occasionally found appearances deceitful."

"Oh, you cynic!" cried Ethel, holding up her finger at "the blasphemer," as she called him.

"It's time you were married again, colonel," interposed Carl Berkhardt. "Ask Adair!"

Everybody laughed at this fling, so significantly that Colonel Flood looked inquiringly at Owen.

"I hope to set you a good example at an early date," said Owen, accepting the situation with a good grace. "I bespeak your congratulations."

The colonel's glance went to Ada's face, resting there with that smile of his which seemed confined to the eyes.

"I will say," he responded slowly, "that I envy you—with all my heart!"

He took off his hat, with a profound bow to Ada.

The long, slow sweep of his obeisance seemed to draw all the blood out of the girl's face. It was with difficulty that she acknowledged his compliment.

"Now you are taking things on faith, colonel," interposed a little whipper-snapper, with

less discretion than eagerness not to be wholly lost sight of. "You hardly know Miss Savoy, you know."

The faint smile of polite acknowledgment with which this speech was received was sufficient of itself to convince the chatterer that he had been inspired by some malicious demon.

The colonel completed his discomfort by turning upon him with that ceremonious politeness which is known as "sitting down" on one.

"Sir, there are self-evident truths, which *nobody* thinks of questioning."

It did not need the quick turning away of all faces to point the sting in the speaker's stress of voice.

Colonel Flood prided himself on being "severe and parliamentary at the same time," and this little opportunity put him in good humor.

But Ada Savoy turned sick at heart.

She scarcely followed the preparations for the race with which the colonel was glad to gratify his guests.

It seemed to her as if she were shut in, oppressed by stifling air. The mere vicinity of her host crushed her.

"Oh, if I could get away!" she cried within herself. "What is the baleful influence that man is exercising over me? What right has he to look at me so? What is the covert menace in his voice? What is he waiting to do to me? Oh, I fear him! He is cruel and deadly!"

"What is it, my darling?" asked Owen, suddenly, as it seemed to her. "Are you ill?"

The girl started violently.

"Oh, am I betraying myself?" was her inward cry. "Do they suspect—anything?"

She turned her eyes to her lover's with such a look that he drew near to her, taking her hand.

"It is like ice!" he exclaimed. "Why did you not tell me? Ada!"

"I am a little tired," she admitted, wearily. "Don't make a scene, please. It is nothing."

"There is no need of disturbing the others," he said, "nor yet sacrificing you. We can steal away together. Nothing will be thought of that!"

He smiled as he alluded to their new relation, which made it their privilege to be alone.

"Oh, you are so good to me!" she breathed. "If we could—for a moment."

"We can—for all our lives!" he replied, affecting a lover's enthusiasm, and surprised to feel that there was a subtle flavor of hypocrisy about it.

He would not admit that it began and ended at his lips; yet it seemed to him like a speech of formal gallantry, and not an impulsive heart-cry.

"I am an infernal scoundrel!" he thought. "What will our life be, if I have to begin by lying to her? Oh, what an idiot I am! Of course I shall love my wife, as other men do. I am not the only man who was ever deceived, and yet found his happiness after all. Such love as hers will be irresistible."

Could he shut his eyes to the folly of such a hope? He was building on sand indeed!

It is never difficult for lovers to slip away from a company that is in a turmoil of pleasurable activity. If they were seen, who was there to challenge them?

Owen found a retreat shaded and shut in by the dense foliage of cottonwoods, where a spring of crystal started from under an emerald bank, to ripple away for the first part of its course free from the trampling of cattle.

Here Ada bared her heart to him with such yearning passion that he assured himself again and again that he ought to be, that he *was* a happy man.

Why did she so hang in his embrace? Why did her eyes so cling to his? Why the pleading cadences of her voice?

"She is afraid that I may be won away from her again!" he said to himself. "God help me, and her too! she has reason for her distrust of me! What a weather-cock I am! Even in her arms, I am hardly certain of myself."

As if fearful that this would be her first and last opportunity, the woman poured out her love for him in a flood of words and caresses, hungrily making demand upon him for reciprocation; and he, all the while conscious that he was urged beyond the spontaneous outgoing of his feelings, simulated the words and endearments of a lover, stopping at nothing to satisfy her craving for assurance of his love.

It would have been better to exercise more reserve; for when overwrought, she at last begged him to leave her to recover her self-possession alone, he first pleaded a desire never to leave her for a moment, yet finally went with a feeling of relief.

Commanding himself for the rebound of his spirits, he joined the others, plunging into the gavity of their sports with feverish abandon.

He did not notice Colonel Flood. In the excitement of the racing every one forgot their host, or supposed him somewhere about, though unseen for the moment.

But he had slipped away from them all; and Ada yet lay on the bank with her face hidden in her hands, as she had cast herself in the throes of anguish at Owen's departure, when his hurried, imperious footstep startled her into quivering alertness.

CHAPTER XVI.

MEPHISTOPHELES.

SMILING like the fabled Mephistopheles, Colonel Flood insisted on the party's honoring his ranch with at least an hour's rest."

As one who awaits a blow, she cowered before him, her hands pressed to her bosom, her eyes pleading with him for mercy.

Not a sound issued from her tremulous lips, though she seemed to essay to speak.

"Well?" he said at last, standing over her with folded arms, and looking down upon her with his Mephistophelean smile.

She rallied with a sudden burst of anger born of desperation.

"What do you want of me? Why do you look at me as you do? What is the meaning of your sneers? I will not endure it! I—I—"

But she broke down, overcome by a sense of terror and utter helplessness.

"Madam, I protest!" ejaculated the colonel.

"You know that I am your adoring slave. Do you need more assurances? I will play the lover, if that will convince you—"

"Stand back! Do not dare to touch me! I will scream for help! Ah! this is insufferable!"

"For one who contemplates screaming for help, you speak very guardedly. If you were to scream, as you say, and your friends—and enemies: even you have enemies, you know—were to throng about, what should you tell them?"

The girl, who had half started up to avoid him, covered her face with her hands, and with a sob sunk back upon the grass mound.

"What have you say to them?" she asked, with a shudder.

"I? Nothing! What should I say?"

His affectation of wonder was tantalizing in the extreme. It was a more deadly menace than if he had threatened her in words. Then she would have known what to fear. As it was, what was the two-edged sword of malice he held suspended over her?

"And have you nothing to say to me?" she asked, shrinking from, yet longing to know the worst.

"Much!" he answered, with a sharp compression of the lips which boded her no good.

"Spare me!" she petitioned. "I cannot bear much."

"Why do you plead to me?" he demanded.

"Because you are so ruthless. I see it in your eyes. Your voice betrays it."

"But why should you fear my malice, granting that I harbor it? What am I to you?"

"Nothing!—less than nothing!" she cried, with desperate hatred.

And she glanced at him as if she could have killed him, had she dared.

He laughed.

"I had hoped to be your husband," he said, with a look of retrospective musing.

"Never!" she interposed, fiercely.

"There is no need of such energy," he replied.

"That is a hope buried with other wrecks of my life—broken dreams, dispelled illusions!"

And he laughed, a laugh not pleasant to hear.

"But what is his new combination in your kaleidoscope?—bright prism of hope?"

And his Mephistophelean smile returned.

The girl wrung her hands in an agony of dread.

"Shall you interfere?" she panted.

"I? Am I not a gentleman?"

"What have you to say to me, then?"

"Only to call your attention to what seems likely to escape your notice."

"And that?"

"You have reconsidered your decision with reference to this lover of even unusual inconsistency."

"I do not understand you."

"Then why do you look so dismayed? However, I am willing to make my meaning clear. On second thought, you have concluded not to rob the little boomer, at least till there has been a reasonable time for a reconciliation."

The girl sprang to her feet, like a tigress at bay.

"You will do this cruel thing?" she asked, with strained breath.

"I? Forbid it Heaven! But you—you will do it. Come! come! fair play's a jewel! Put yourself in her place. Do you count on losing your lover at every little spat?"

"What interest have you in this girl?"

"None whatever, since I have never seen her, never heard of her—but once."

"You have heard of her, then?"

"Since I speak of her with intelligence. How should I otherwise?"

"From whom?"

"That's my secret. But my informant is reliable—I assure you of that."

And he laughed; at first slightly, then with an outburst, as if at some amusing incident recalled.

"If you care nothing for her—"

"There is no mystery. My interest is in you. To have you subjected to the fickle whims of a fellow who changes sweethearts between two kisses! Think of it! Why, I should not be a friend if I did not—"

"There is no call for your concern. I take the risk upon myself."

Why plead so futilely? Why pretend to interpret his sarcasm literally?

"With woman's generous infatuation!" he

laughed. "But it is the part of a friend—a true friend—"

"Then you command this sacrifice?" she cried, passionately.

"You will make it, for the wisdom of it," he answered, with affected gravity.

"And if I do not?—if I defy you?"

"An impossible hypothesis. You see, a woman is a creature of sentiment, where a man is thoroughly practical. A man wants possession—that, or nothing. A woman, if she cannot have her heart's desire, would rather lose it gracefully."

"And do you fancy I will submit—"

"To have your lost lover look back with regret, rather than with—"

"With what?—with what?"

Like a grinning devil he pierced her to the heart with a single word:

"Horror!"

The girl gave a sharp gasp and sunk to the ground.

"Betrayed! betrayed!" she whispered hoarsely.

With her hand pressed over her heart and her eyes closed, she leaned against the trunk of the cottonwood which overhung the spot, clinging desperately to her ebbing consciousness.

When she had partly gained the mastery, she struggled to her knees, and extending her clasped hands, unsealed her languid eyelids.

Speech would have been useless to her had she been equal to it. She stared into vacancy. Mephistopheles was gone.

Anxious at her long delay, Owen went in quest of her, to find her lying on her face insensible.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CAPTURE.

OWEN ADAIR'S first impulse was prompted by alarm, his second by the force of social training.

Out of consideration for Ada's feelings a scene must be avoided if possible. So he first sought to revive her unaided, and soon held her weeping in his arms.

Why did she cling to him so, while she assured him that it was nothing—absolutely nothing? She thanked him for his discretion in not attracting the notice of the others, and as soon as she was somewhat composed, went and mingled with the company.

He accepted her explanation of over-excitement; but in the days that followed, that hung about her which filled him with perplexity.

In vain did he assure himself that he was a happy man. He would have challenged to mortal combat any one who had flouted him with the charge that he was not.

For one thing, Ada had no cause to complain of want of devotion. He was most assiduous in his attentions. If she had not been so blinded by passion, she might have detected something almost remorseful in his exuberance of tenderness.

The very soldiers at the Fort got to smiling at his approach.

"I say, Bill," laughed a sentry, as he met his fellow at the turn in their beats, "here's his nibs ag'in! The little woman must be a-feelin' better'n she did last week."

"A heap," responded Bill. "Give us a chaw, will ye?"

"H't! Here's the ole man!"

And they walked apart with stony gravity on the appearance of the officer of the guard.

While in Ada's company, Owen was as gay and gallant as a lover need be; but alone, galloping over the prairie to his home, he was now feverishly excited, now gloomy-browed with despondency. For miles and miles he rode, with clinched teeth.

"What is the matter with me? I am a cowardly hound! Is it possible I do not know my own mind? I will shoot myself if I end by breaking her heart. How she loves me!"

How she loved him indeed—yet as one who held his love with a feeling of constant insecurity, living in the blissful present, deliberately shutting her eyes to the impending future.

Those eyes haunted him, and the pathetic cadences of her voice. It was not reproach in them, but an undercurrent of unutterable sorrow.

Not that she was sad. On the contrary, she was gay. But it was the gayety that touches no sympathetic chord of gladness; a gayety sadder than tears; the gayety, as we have said, of one who makes the most of the present.

But it was the unstinted quality of her affection that cut Owen to the soul. She gave all, grateful for the slightest return, demanding nothing as her right.

Why was not this enough for happiness? Why was he not satisfied?

"What in the name of all the furies do I want?" he asked himself, enraged at the unappeased craving that haunted him.

And it must be admitted that he swore more than one lusty oath, than which nothing could be more futile.

It was while in such a mood, riding across the prairie in the darkness not far from midnight, that his horse suddenly threw up his head and snorted, stopping stock-still.

Taken so completely unawares as to be almost thrown out of the saddle up on the animal's neck, Owen recovered his balance, and said soothingly:

"Eh, boy? What's the matter? Steady, old fellow! It must be a rattler, or maybe a coyote."

He sought to rein the animal to one side, and go on; but at that moment he heard a hurling sound close about his ears, and the bight of a lasso settled down over him.

Luckily it encircled the cantle of his saddle, so that when his horse reared and swerved backward, it imprisoned him, instead of plucking him from his seat.

Owen had not shared the life of his own cowboys so long and so intimately without coming to know a lasso as if by instinct.

By an automatic motion, not waiting for the conscious bidding of his will, his hand plucked forth his bowie, and inserted its keen blade between the rope and his thigh.

The yells of his would-be captors had hardly startled his ears, the movement of his horse was scarcely checked, when he was free, with rein and spur turning the animal for flight.

"It is Seth Wendover!" he said to himself. "He means to murder me yet! Does he think that I betrayed him to Browning? Does she believe it of me, I wonder?"

Why did his thoughts revert to Pearl—ever to Pearl? She was lost to him; he was bound to another. What mattered her esteem?

Besides, it was a moment for action, not for reflection. Liberty, life, hung in the balance!

Away he sped, and at his heels came the blood-thirsty rout, pell-mell.

"Head him off thar, Jim! Be you asleep? Blast your dirty hidel ef he gits away— Down him! down him, I say!"

Owen saw a shadowy figure making for him at an angle. It was plain that he had run into an ambush. On the other side too he heard the quick thud of hoofs.

Out came his revolver. Its flash burnt a hole in the darkness. A gasp, an execration, and Jim's horse careered riderless.

To the left a dusky figure swung its shadowy arm aloft.

That meant another lasso. Even his enemies Owen would not kill without ruth.

A shot at the horse, and the whole phantom seemed to drop down into the earth.

Then yells of rage, blending with shouts in command, made the night hideous.

Away! away! he knew not whither. All directions were alike in that Cimmerian gloom. All ways led out of the trap into which he had fallen.

But at his heels thundered an enemy who knew his own purposes, and would not waver from them.

"Fetch the hoss! Fill him full o' lead!" shouted a voice the fugitive could not fail to recognize.

As he had surmised, it was Seth Wendover.

The discarded lover must have been desperate, or sure of his quarry, to so recklessly betray himself.

Setting the example to his abandoned crew, he opened fire, to be followed by them without a moment's hesitation.

It was a perfect fusillade. There was no chance to escape it, even with the advantage of darkness.

Owen knew that he was lost, before he felt his horse leap with the sting of the leaden hail.

A mad bound, a scream of pain, rage and terror, and the horse went down, riddled with bullets.

Kicking his feet free of the stirrups, the rider leaped over the pommel of his saddle as he would have vaulted over a post.

The shock of alighting threw him upon his knees, though he struck fairly on his feet; and he was in imminent peril of being trampled under the hoofs of his pursuers' horses.

"He's down! We've got him! Pull up! pull up!" yelled Seth, suiting the action to the word.

"Look out fur him! He'll try to give us the slip yet. Off yer hosses! You can't see him in the dark from the saddle. Look sharp fur his crawlin' away in the grass."

Drawn sharply up on their haunches, the horses of the enemy scattered dirt all over Owen. He was in their very midst. A chance blow with one of those iron-bound hoofs might disable him.

He would have taken a hint from Seth's shrewd forecasting of possibilities, but he must escape the nearest danger first.

Forced to his feet to dodge the avalanche of horse-flesh, he found himself encompassed by men who leaped to the ground all about him.

He had the one advantage of being indistinguishable from his enemies. In the darkness a man counted for a man, be he friend or foe.

In a moment all was confusion, the outlaws seizing upon one another by mistake.

Wrestling in a desperate grapple, he who was being overcome shouting for assistance, there was danger that the very headlong fury of the assailants would defeat their object, and give their victim a chance to escape.

Owen knocked down the one man who seemed to have kept his eye upon him. It was Seth himself, though Owen did not know it at the

time. Then he dropped upon his knees, and crept under the belly of a horse whose restive tramping threatened to cripple him, if not worse.

Coming out on the other side he met a foe, who guessed at his identity from his movements.

"Hyar he is, fellers! I've got him!"

To his cost! Owen had him. Claspings him about the knees, he rose with him and threw him over his head, such a pretty somerset that he landed fairly on his head, at the risk of his neck. He heard the crack, saw stars, and was out of the battle.

Again sinking upon his knees, Owen scrambled away, now with some faint hopes of success.

But at this critical moment Seth proved himself equal to the emergency.

"Let every feller about his own name!" he cried. "Boys, go fur the silent one. Never mind the name, but go by the sound o' the voice. You all know one another. He'll have to give himself away."

The result was an immediate recognition of antagonists who were struggling with might and main to capture each other.

This discovery was followed by a moment of paralysis, in which all seemed to feel that they were to be hopelessly baffled.

But once more Seth's fertility of resource met the difficulty.

"Scatter!" he cried. "He's crawlin' off in the grass. Keep shoutin', each his own name, so's we won't git mixed ag'in. Drop on to anythin' you find crawlin', an' yell fur help. Ten dollars to the one as spots him. Remember! It's a hangin' matter. Don't all go in a lump!"

Acting promptly on their leader's suggestion, one of their number ran upon Owen before he had gone twenty paces.

"Hyar he is, fellers! This way! Shell I drop him?"

"No! no!" commanded Seth. "Jump onto him!"

The fugitive was forced to his feet, and he showed that he was as good at running as at creeping.

"He'll shake us all! Shell I drop him?" repeated the one who had discovered him.

"No! no!" insisted Seth. "To boss! Half a dozen of ye into the saddle! Head him off! Stick to him, Bob! We'll bag the snoozer before he's much older."

The flight, though so gallantly prosecuted, was hopeless. Almost in a moment Owen was surrounded again.

"Keep off! keep off!" shouted Seth, who had himself sought the saddle. "We don't want him to come the same dodge on us ag'in. Keep him surrounded—that's all you have to do—till I git a show."

But Owen resolved to give them more lively occupation than that.

Seeing that he was discovered, and this time not likely to be lost; and expecting no mercy at the hands of his enemy, once captured; he determined to sell his life or liberty, whichever was in peril, at the highest possible figure.

Continuing to run at full speed, he opened fire on his enemies, shooting at those who were before him, heading him off.

He emptied two saddles; when, no longer regardless of their leader's wishes, they sought personal safety by returning the compliment.

The bullets were soon whistling about him in the liveliest kind of fashion.

He felt more than one twinge, though none of them brought him to the ground; when Seth, seeing his purpose about to be defeated by the killing of the victim he sought to take alive, shouted:

"Lasso him! Curse you! be you all goin' back on me?"

This suggestion was promptly acted upon; and suddenly Owen felt himself tripped and thrown headlong.

The next instant a horse was pulled sharply up, scattering the dirt over him as he lay; and yelling with triumph Seth leaped from the saddle and precipitated himself upon him, shouting:

"Let up! He's my meat! I've got him, blast his liver an' lights!"

Owen lost his revolver in his fall; but it was only to give him a hand free to seek his bowie.

The struggle that followed might have been a desperate one for Seth Wendover, had not his adversary's left arm been entangled in one of the two nooses that had been thrown at him.

As it was, he required both hands to save himself from receiving a mortal wound. Owen was not disarmed and secured till others came to their leader's assistance.

It will be remembered that, recently recovered from his tumble from the back of an unbroken broncho, Owen had gone to the rough handling of the mob in the boomers' camp. Scarcely recovered from the effects of this, he was now once more taxed to the extent of his endurance by the lusty ruffian who had grappled him, while his very life was being drained through several wounds which he had received.

When he lay at last at their mercy, he was about as nearly dead as a man could well be and yet hang on to life.

At any rate the fight was effectually taken out of him.

He lay with closed eyes, breathing heavily, scarcely able to lift an arm, even if they had not bound him.

Seth stood over him panting and swearing with nervous excitement.

"Blast me ef he ain't a good one! I will say that," he observed, shaking his head and rubbing his hands. "Boys, I'll remember you fur this. I wanted him alive, an' we've got him. We've got him!" he repeated, exultantly, "by the lord Harry! Ha! ha! ha!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FIENDISH ACT.

"CAP," interposed one of his men, "you will excuse me; but gittin' an' keepin' is two mighty different things—they be so!"

"What's the matter with keepin' him?" demanded Seth, angrily, as if the speaker were about to rob him.

"With all the pleasure in life, fur me!" said the fellow. "But suppose you leave him to bleed to death?"

"Eh! Blast him, he can't do that."

"I'll bet you he's got my mark on him; an' ef he has, it's bigger'n a cider tap."

"What fur did you salt him? Didn't I tell you I wanted him kickin'?"

"It was my pard as he was blazin' at. I didn't 'low to give him too many chances."

"I'll come back at you, Nate, ef the chance offers," said his pard. "All the same, he didn't let none of the ruddy out o' me."

"Jimmy Fair hadn't the same good luck, I reckon," suggested another.

"Hold on, boys," here cried Seth. "Strike a light. Let's look this chap over. If you've flummoxed him, you've knocked the whole thing in the head—that's all. One o' these days you'll 'larn as, when I talk, I'm talkin' money into your pockets."

As he felt that Owen's clothes were dank with warm blood, he began to swear in a way that showed that he had more at stake than the money interest of his crowd.

A light was struck, and while one of the men held the burning matches, Seth made a hurried examination.

"He's all right," he said, at last. "Blast him! he can't git out o' my clutches that way! You have plugged him in places enough, an' to spare, but he ain't cut deep. Hyar! pile him up onto this hyar boss till we git his'n."

"Kin he ride, boss?"

"He'll have to ride. Up he goes."

Owen was too much exhausted to resist anything they chose to do to him.

He was placed in the saddle, but proved too limp to ride without being held on.

In this way he was carried to the nearest timber, where a rude horse litter was improvised, in which he was hurried away, he knew not whither.

His wounds, which had been temporarily dressed, were more carefully looked after at daybreak; but he was given no time to rest.

Leaving him to the conduct of his fellows, Seth went on some other business of his own.

With only such seasons of rest as the other men required, he was hurried forward, day after day, till Oklahoma and all its interests there were left hundreds of miles behind.

He had no idea where they were taking him, save that they kept following the course of the sun westward. To all questions his captors gave but one answer, in substance:

"You keep yer fly-trap shut, pardner. When Cap comes, he'll fill you up as full as you're like to stomach."

At last they stopped at a mountain hut. One glance at the careless ruffians who came to stare at him and then lounge indifferently away, showed Owen that he had fallen among outlaws of the most desperate character.

One advantage he owed to the wonderful salubrity of the prairie air. His wounds were healing, and he was so far recuperated that he could walk about without particular discomfort.

This he was allowed to do at will, only inconvenienced by having his hands securely bound behind his back, while his feet were hopped so as to limit his movements to a cramped walk. The least attempt to run would result in his tripping himself up.

He was given a plenty to eat, such rude fare as the others had, and as he showed a disposition to make the best of the situation, instead of scowling futilely at his detainers, he was soon treated with rough familiarity by the men he found at the hut.

Their conversation, to which his presence offered no restraint, was not a whit behind their villainous appearance. They openly talked of robbery and murder before him.

This fact was the most ominous in Owen's experience thus far.

"If it were intended that I should ever go out of this place alive, they would not treat me with such indifference," he reflected. "But why bring me so far to murder me? What use has that villain for me before he puts me finally out of his way?"

Could it be that Seth's malignity would be

appeased with nothing short of torture? But this seemed too atrocious, even for such as he.

Owen was not kept long in suspense. Within twenty-four hours Seth dashed up to the hut, apparently in a towering rage at some defeat of his purposes.

Loading the air with execrations, he announced:

"The jig's up! The hull thing's knocked in the head! We've got to git out o' this hyar; an' we don't want this carrion on our hands nuther. But I'll git my satisfaction out o' him before I loose my grip on him, you bet your life!"

"Dave," addressing one of the men of the hut, "I want some p'ison—that's what I'm after. Blast me ef I don't make wolf's bait of him in a shape that'll make the very wolves what gits him squirm! Ef you hain't got no p'ison, I'll take pounded glass. I'm bound to fix him, bet a boss!"

This proposition did not seem to disconcert Dave greatly.

"You're welcome to the medicine," he said, carelessly, "ef you will have it; but to my notion, shootin' a more gentlemanly way. I don't make nor meddle with no man's business, I don't. Every man knows his own business best. That's my motto. My put-in don't cost you nothin'. You take it fur what you 'low it's worth."

"It ain't worth a cuss to me!" declared Seth; "so I don't take it fur nothin'. This hyar snoozer has knocked me galley-west, an' I'm hungry—hungrier'n a wolf—fur to git squar' with him. I want to see him kick; I want to hear him yell. Come down, Doc, with yer ratsbane!"

But at this point, Dave showing no reluctance to comply with the request, Seth's own followers interposed, through a spokesman whom they had appointed after a hurried whispered consultation.

"Look a-hyar, Cap," he said, "we hain't got no noose about our necks yet. Kidnappin' ain't no hangin' matter. Who's after us; an' how near be they?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Seth, enraged at this interference.

"That you've got a right to git yourself in as much of a scrape as you please—when you're goin' it alone."

"And when I ain't goin' it alone?"

"Then your pards has somethin' to say. That's a fair proposition."

"An' what have you got to say?" still pursued Seth, as if holding in the outburst of resentment of this presumptuous interference with his authority.

"Not much. We've got about as deep into this t'ing as we care to go—blind."

"An' what be you proposin' to do about it?"

"Call a halt till we see our way clearer."

"A halt on me?"

"You bet!"

"An' how many is thar of ye?"

Seth cast his eye over the group, as if to pick out the disaffected ones.

"The pile of us," was the summary disposal of that matter.

Owen stood waiting the issue of this debate, of course with no slight interest.

With a bound Seth reached him, and before any one could guess his purpose, knocked him down.

Then planting a heavy foot on the breast of his prostrate victim, he whipped out both revolvers, crying:

"Dave, I reckon you an' your crowd is backin' me?"

"You bet, pard!" answered the outlaw, unruffled.

And his crowd made good the word of their chief, apparently as indifferent as he.

"Now maybe you're crowdin' me, an' maybe you ain't!" cried Seth, glaring at his men.

For a moment the two companies stood opposed. The outlaws had their weapons drawn. The late boomers had not been so quick, and so found themselves at a hopeless disadvantage.

The magical "drop" is the best of the argument, in the West.

Though they were more numerous than the outlaws they had come among, yet the first fusillade would have more than evened that up.

At such close range the fire of these ruffians was deadly.

After a breathless moment, the malcontents yielded sulkily.

"We was lookin' out fur our own skins. I reckon you can't blame us fur that," said their spokesman. "You've got the bulge on us. It might 'a' been the other way, though."

"Bein's as it is how it is, you cave?"

"We ain't no hogs."

"All right. You won't lose nothin' by stickin' to me, ef ye only kin see it."

"Dave, I'll trouble you fur that dose. I reckon I'll run my own funeral in my own way yet a while."

With perfect nonchalance Dave went into the hut, and reappeared with a tin cup containing some liquid.

Till now Owen had said nothing; but now he spoke.

"And do you mean to say that you are resolved to kill me like a dog?"

"Like a dog," assented Seth, carelessly. "I hain't no further use fur you."

"You cannot do this thing!"

"I can't, eh? I'll show you."

And dropping upon Owen's breast, he requested;

"Pass that medicine, Dave."

Owen looked at his enemy, still incredulous; but the devilish malignity in Seth's face at last convinced him of his implacable resolve.

"Will you swaller this thing easy; or will I have to handle you like a hoss?" asked Seth.

"Of my own free will? Do you think it likely?"

"Oh! you mean to kick, eh? Waal, that's your business, not mine. Hyar goes fur a test o' muscle!"

And he seized his victim by the throat.

Now Owen, helplessly bound as he was, began to struggle frantically.

Even without this disadvantage, weakened by loss of blood, he would have been no match for his burly antagonist.

Seth strove to force his mouth open by inserting a stick between his teeth.

In this he failed, but Owen found opportunity to cry:

"Men, are you human beings; and can you see this monstrous thing go on?"

A sullen frown and an inarticulate growl were all that this appeal called forth.

Then the struggle went on, Seth fighting with the grim pertinacity of a bull-dog.

At last Owen lay panting and but dully conscious with exhaustion. Seth had changed his position so as to hold his head between his knees.

"Now, pard, the medicine. I reckon he'll take it without a whimper."

"He'll spit it out."

"We'll see if he does."

Forcing Owen to breathe through his mouth, by holding his nose, Seth poured the contents of the cup into it, and then throwing the cup away, seized his victim by the chin, and held him so that he could not turn his head in the slightest.

Unable to close his mouth, and so expel the liquid, for the gag that had been forced into it, it was a question of swallow, or suffocate.

A spasmodic gulp, then a fit of violent coughing, and Seth released his victim.

"How's that?" he demanded. "I reckon you won't want no doctor after me. I'm death on fits, you bet!"

And he laughed brutally.

Overcome with weakness, Owen turned over on his face.

"To succumb to such a brute as that!" he murmured.

Then, with a sob:

"Oh, Pearl!"

But if Seth waited to see his victim writhe, he was disappointed. There were no contortions. As if from utter prostration, Owen lapsed into a state of unconsciousness.

Of those who looked on, hardened wretches as they were, more than one heaved a sigh of relief.

"That's a good man," observed he who led the revolt. "He deserves a better send-off—I will say that."

"Blast him!" growled Seth, "that thar's the way his ole man sneaked out of our revenge!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE ABDUCTION.

A SUDDEN change took place in the demeanor of Pearl Pancoast. One day she awoke from a long period of dejected abstraction, to start to her feet and throw her hair back from her face with a deep inhalation and a flashing of the eye with renewed purpose.

"And this," she cried, in fierce scorn, "for such as he! I ought to be ashamed of myself, and I am! From this moment I cast him out of my heart and life! I will begin anew, and win back my father's confidence. He is trusty. I will never look upon another man than him. How I hate them all! One and all, they are selfish brutes. Bah! I will not think of it!"

How could she begin her return to the old life? It would never be the same. The fire of passion through which she had passed had burnt up all the tender illusions of maidenhood. Never again should she have those shy day-dreams. All that fairy-land of sweet promise was now overshadowed by the deadly upas of bitter hate.

"But I can live!" she cried out in her despair. "All my life is not blasted! He has not the power to destroy everything!"

She dashed the hot tears from her eyes.

Oh, her woman's weakness, how she loathed it! Should she never, never, never be free from this hated sway?

"He never loved me! He despised me from the first, as a thing of the mire, that he could pick up at will, and throw away again with a contemptuous laugh! Can't I keep that before my mind?" she cried, fairly beating her head in her self-despite. "Oh, am I so mean that one I loathe can yet bind me like this?"

Action!—that is our one relief from the travail of the spirit.

Issuing from the wagon in which she had hid away, and walking with a step that attracted surprised glances from all sides, she sought a

rope corral in which a number of horses were kept from straying.

Needing no saddle, but keeping her seat with only the aid of a girth, and careless of the bridle she used, being perhaps most familiar with the simplest form of rope-halter, she had no difficulty about securing a mount.

Then away over the prairie with the fleetness of a bird on the wing.

She wanted to be alone, not only screened from the eyes of people, but with a feeling of the freedom of nature's wide expanse, to regain the balance of her mind.

Let her drink in renewed joyousness with the uncontaminated air. Oh, it must be possible! How often had she expanded her breast with the feeling that there was nothing between her and Heaven, till it seemed as if her soul would leap forth and take wing, up! up! up! in the deepening empyrean!

Away! away! till her breath came fast. Away! away! till the bounding blood burned in her cheeks. Away! away! till every vein coursed with the glowing elixir of life.

But the bracing air fanned her cheeks in vain. Her rapid flight through space availed nothing. The fire of her horse imparted no exhilaration.

On the contrary, the unbroken expanse of the prairie only reminded her of the man she had watched for. She found herself half-expecting to see him appear from every motte that came into view.

But no! He was miles away, forgetful of her as he hung upon the words of her rival.

Returning home, she sought again her seclusion, only to be prostrated in a paroxysm of despair and rage worse than before.

Exhausted at last, she sunk into a fitful slumber, broken by dreams that left no respite from the suffering of the day.

Low moans, inarticulate mutterings, profound sighs, broken sobs, restless contortions of the body, evinced the pain that haunted her pillow.

At last she started into complete wakefulness, with every sense on the strain, while she quivered with apprehension of she knew not what.

What had she heard? Surely nothing but the ordinary sounds of the night.

She lay and listened. Only the mournful sighing of the wind, presaging a storm, came to her straining ear, with now and then the sound of some wakeful animal.

The flickering light of the camp-fire sent waves of changeable illumination over one side of the canvas tilt of the wagon in which she lay, while the other was black with shadow.

It must have been some forgotten fantasy of her dream that had frightened her, she argued, and was slowly dropping off to sleep again, when she was once more electrified by a sound so close at hand that she involuntarily shrunk from contact with something directly upon her.

Was it some one breathing—inside the wagon? But a glance showed that she was alone.

To secure greater seclusion, she had had the wagon drawn a little apart from the others. Why not, in this country where there was no cause for apprehension?

As there was no longer reason for vigilance, the night-guard had been dispensed with. Every one in the camp was wrapped in the profound slumber of healthy out-of-door life.

While she was trying to persuade herself that it was but a hallucination, a trick of her overwrought nerves, a sharp hiss close to her left ear drew her eye to the darkened side of the tilt.

To her amazement and horror she saw the point of the knife tearing a long slit in the canvas. Then two hands seized the sides of the rent, and pulled them apart.

In the opening thus formed appeared a face—a face that she instantly recognized, for the first time in her life with a thrill of paralyzing fear.

Well might the eyes that stared in upon her strike her dumb with dread! They were round and bloodshot with a desperation that would stop at nothing to accomplish its purpose. The brows were knit; the quivering lips were drawn back, disclosing the set teeth.

Almost instantaneous with the sight, the fumes of alcohol assailed her sense of smell.

Seth Wendover had fortified himself for an act of desperation surpassing anything he had ever before attempted.

All in a flash she realized his fell purpose and her peril. The horror of it struck her dumb and turned her limbs to stone.

"Not a word! Not a sound!"

His hoarse command was reinforced by a deadly menace with his bowie, held so close to her throat that she imagined she felt the chill irradiated by the cold steel.

"Now hark to me," he whispered, while her fascinated eyes were riveted to his, glancing by the edge of the bowie that hung suspended over her, "I'm hyar on business. Up to now I've fooled with ye, an' let ye have things yer own way. Now I've made up my mind to run the thing to suit myself, or put you out o' yer misery in double-quick time. Will you pull out o' this with me on the quiet; or will you go to Tophet sizzlin'?"

The girl could not speak. She who till now had been so brave, now found her nerves so unstrung that she was left as weak as the weakest of her sex.

"Holler ef you want to," suggested her persecutor. "One yelp'll bring the camp all up standin'. But what they find—waal, it won't be worth much to nobody."

Still she regarded him with those stony eyes.

"Make up yer mind," he persisted. "Ef you'd druther go with the dev—with the angels, I mean, than with yer humble sarvant, you'll git a through ticket, free, gratis, fur nothin'! Speak quick!"

"I'll go with you," said the girl, tremulously.

"O. K. Git into your duds the quickest you kin, an' without no noise."

"If you will give me an opportunity—"

"To give me the slip! No, thank you! I ain't makin' no sich exchange. Don't be foolish!—this hyar ain't no time fur frills."

Without another word of protest the girl rose to a sitting posture, and made such a toilet as women will in emergency.

Meanwhile Seth held her under the frowning muzzle of his revolver, with the reminder:

"You know I'm a dead shot. Don't make me sp'ile what I'd be sorry to."

Trembling like an aspen, Pearl approached him. The critical moment had arrived for her to get out of the wagon.

All the while she was dressing she had been calculating her chances.

Once out of the camp in his power, hope would be past. For the first time she realized the desperate character of the man with whom she had hitherto been trifling. As long as he hoped to win her to submission, she might despise him; but the moment he passed the Rubicon, and resolved to force her, if necessary, she was helpless.

If she was to escape him, it must be now, before he had really got her in his power. All she asked was to get from under his eye for an instant. Then she would rely upon her activity, taking long chances of his intercepting her flight with a fatal shot.

"I am ready to get down now," she said. "I suppose you will want me to get out there, so as not to lose sight of me?"

By this frankness she sought to throw him off his guard.

"You bet!" he answered. "I've made it o' purpose."

She walked up to him, and held the flaps of the canvas apart with both hands, preparatory to passing through.

"Will you give me room?" she asked, waiting for him to step back.

"Come right along," he replied, offering his left hand, his revolver still held menacingly in his right.

"I can get down without your help," she said, striving to steady her voice, and affecting impatience.

"You kin, easy enough," he answered; "but you won't."

"I will if you will let me."

"Which the same I won't. I'm 'lowin' to take you down. Put your foot out on this hyar brace."

"Have your own way!" she retorted, pretending anger where she really felt despair. "But you are a brute! I will always maintain that."

"That's as you take me," answered Seth. "I've been playin' the purty dodge till I've made up my mind as nothin' is like to come o' it. Now I've got down to hardpan, biz every time."

She stepped out on the brace of the sideboard and made as if she were about to evade him by leaping to the ground before he could prepare to receive her.

This was her last hope. If he had thrust his weapon into his belt to have both hands free to catch her, she would have leaped back and screamed at the top of her voice.

Instead of giving her this opportunity, he first seized her wrist.

"Now go slow," he said. "But make no mistake. I kin kill you before anybody kin git to you, if you try to play roots on me."

Then he put up his revolver, and lifted her bodily from the wagon.

"Set me down!" she whispered, imperiously.

"How dare you touch me?"

"It's rather late in the day fur that sort of a conundrum," he chuckled. "But now you shet up that purty mouth o' yours, ef you don't want me to shet it up in my own peculiar way. An' don't you disremember one thing. We're goin' out whar the firelight'll strike us, an' it'll be the onluckiest job o' your life ef any one pokes their head out of a tilt an' sees us."

"Set me down!" she insisted. "I will walk. Will it not be more likely to excite curiosity if you are seen carrying me? Set me down, I say!"

He stood still in the shadow of the wagon, and thought a moment.

"Waal, I reckon that's whar your head's level," he said, at last. "I'd ruther have you alive, ef I kin git you. Ef any one sees us an' speaks, you answer 'um."

Then he set her down, but held her a prisoner with his iron grip on her wrist once more.

"Look a' this byar," he said, drawing his bowie and presenting its point ominously at her bosom. "You can't shake me. Don't ye try it."

The girl compressed her lips to stifle a sob of despair.

So they set out side by side, as unsuspecting a spectacle as two lovers stealing away in the moonlight would have been.

Here the firelight fell upon them; there they passed into the black shadows. But just before they got beyond the range of the dying flames, they heard some one stirring.

Both looked back.

Before Pearl saw who it was, Seth's arm went about her waist, and she was lifted off her feet and laid noiselessly on the ground.

Never before had she realized the strength of the man with whom she was so helpless to cope the moment it became a mere question of physical strength. If she had been a child he could not have handled her with more apparent ease.

As noiselessly, he sunk down partly upon her, so that the weight of his body prohibited the slightest movement on her part.

But this was not enough. Weak as she was, the might have struggled sufficiently to attract attention.

"Do you feel it?" he asked. "It's the point o' my pig-sticker. Have you ever seen the blood fly? One squeal out o' you!"

Could she feel it? She scarcely dared to breathe, lest she thrust her bosom against it hard enough to force it through her clothing. Every bound of her heart was an agony of dread lest it precipitate the catastrophe, and cause the next to leap out through the door that thirsty blade had opened!

The hoarse breathing of her captor close to her ear filled the chamber of her brain with such uproar that she could scarce hear anything else.

Who was it that had got down out of a wagon? Was he coming that way? Suppose it was her father?

Seth lifted his head, and turned it so that he could look, though he held her pinned so close to the ground that she could see nothing.

But she could feel the straining of his muscles, the laboring of his breast. He was like a wild beast fearing to be robbed of his prey.

Now that his fierce breathing was not directly in her ear, she could hear the footsteps of a man. The heaviness of his tread left no doubt in this matter.

He seemed moving about aimlessly, with pauses now and then, as if he were looking about, and listening.

She strained her ears to discover if he was coming that way. Surely the steps drew nearer! And Seth—he seemed to be gathering himself for a sudden assault.

She believed that he would take long chances, in his present desperate mood, to keep her alive. If detected, would he try to kill the unlucky discoverer, and still escape with his prisoner?

Then recurred the thought that it might be her father; and she formed a desperate resolve.

Whatever resulted to her, she must save him. If it was indeed he, when Seth gathered himself for the spring, she would seize him, and send forth a shriek that would rouse the whole camp.

He would probably drive his knife to her heart; but the time thus lost would give her father a chance to prepare for the assault.

Yet she could not sacrifice her life if it was not he, if the man, whoever he was, stopped short of the fatal discovery.

She waited.

Seth slowly drew himself up off of her, gathering his knees under him. His face, seen out of the corner of her eye, in the faint illumination reflected from the foliage still further from the fire, assumed a perfectly diabolical aspect.

"Curse him!" he was saying to himself, "what is his life to me? He will force me to kill her or lose her. If I could have carved up a million such as he, so's not to have him loafin' round jest now!"

The man, now almost within reach of the hidden abductor, stopped, stooped down and picked up a twig, broke off a leaf, and began to run its stem between his teeth.

Presently he began to whistle softly to himself.

With an inaudible sigh Pearl suddenly collapsed. The whistle told her that it was not her father. The reaction at that moment was so great that she almost fainted.

After looking into the shadows of the chaparral and up through the leaves at the starlit sky, the night-walker lounged back to the wagons, and climbed into his own.

"It's the luckiest job Aleck Hoover ever done, that goin' back to roost!" growled Seth in Pearl's ear. "I'd a' fixed him first, an' you afterward, ef a row had come of it."

And he got up, lifting the trembling girl again to her feet.

Once more grasping her wrist, he forced her to follow him till, at a safe distance, two horses were found in waiting.

"I'd give you the best mount," he said, "ef it wasn't fur your givin' me the slip fur my pains. Don't try no funny business with me. You ain't

so free as you look to be. I'll trouble you to keep close beside me; an' ef you fall off—accidentally on purpose!—I may have to shoot at ye. An' I won't shoot but once!"

With this warning he set out, and the wretched girl found herself led away into the most odious captivity she could conceive.

Day after day Seth pressed steadily westward, till Pearl was satisfied that they must be in that absolutely lawless part of the Indian Territory known as No Man's Land.

Here was no help, no hope! Here, where every man was his own judge, jury, and executioner, her life might be blighted with impunity.

Exhausted, almost dead with suffering and the fatigue of that forced flight, the girl gave herself up to a dull despair that was next door to unconsciousness.

Seth had been joined by confederates. She knew them all. They belonged to her captor, body and soul. After a single glance around on their stony faces, she paid no further attention to them. Nothing could have been more useless than an appeal to their sympathies.

At last Seth called a halt, and leaving Pearl in charge of his men, with the recommendation never to let him set eyes again on one of them if they lost her, set forward alone.

Then for the first time the girl addressed her detainers.

"How much does this ruffian pay you?" she asked. "Don't you suppose I am worth more to my father than to him? At any rate, don't you know that my father can and will pay you more for me than he does? Will you take me back and get the ransom?"

Some turned away with a careless shrug of the shoulders. One replied, with a grin quite different in its insolence from any the girl had ever before got from him:

"Me hain't got nothin' ag'in' you, Miss Pearl; but me don't like the idee, an' that's a fact, o' havin' to wear them thar dude collars fur to hide the extra length of our necks. The ole man's a scorch when he's riled!"

"But I will guarantee you against retaliation!"

"Your will might be good, but, anyway, we've figgered this hyar thing down, an' pitched our money on the Jack."

"On the Knave! That is true. But let me offer one more consideration. If my father is a scorch, as you say, do you fancy he will rest till he has avenged me? Is this world big enough to hold you after you have destroyed his daughter?"

The fellow only laughed.

"Waal, I reckon he'll be looked after."

Then the girl sunk under the paralysis of a new fear. They were about to murder her father!

Might not he be dead already?

CHAPTER XX.

DESPAIR.

JASON PANCOAST was an unhappy man. Disappointed in his ambition to lead a successful raid into Oklahoma, where so many previous attempts had failed, he had to bear the reproachful scowls and discontented grumbling of a lot of unreasonable people, and to keep their pent spleen from venting itself in open broils among themselves.

The older men swore, but lacked the enterprise for anything more active. The young men were restive, and were from hour to hour on the verge of disbanding.

Having exhausted argument and persuasion on them, Pancoast was at his wits' end to keep them from open revolt, and after Seth's departure, had to make overtures to Aleck Hoover, and enlist his aid.

But if all this galled him, the thing that rankled like a festering wound was the alienation of his daughter.

He never realized till now how much he had come to depend upon her. When he was tired and perplexed, her cheerful way of looking at things, her quick sympathy and clear-headed entering into his troubles, her shrewd counsel, refreshed him and rekindled his hope.

But now, besides the loss of this support and the material help she could have been to him by her influence, he had to struggle against the bitter thought that she had turned against him and gone over to his enemies.

To be sure, it was he that had driven her away. But who is just in his grief?

Meanwhile, it was the strength of his love that made the implacability of his condemnation.

So the day dawned which was to be the most wretched of his life. He had been robbed with no warning of his loss.

The time had been when Pearl's greeting smile was the first glad event of the day. That had passed. He had learned not to expect it. He had not learned yet, however, to reconcile himself to its loss.

On this morning especially he longed to see her, though her moping gait, where all before had been bounding life, should pierce his heart.

For a time he wandered aimlessly about the camp, his frowning look putting everybody in an antagonistic mood, so that he got the impression that everything was wrong and every-

body cross, as is apt to happen on a rainy morning.

At last he drifted back to his own wagon, near which his long-suffering wife was doing her uncomplaining best to prepare a gleam of cheerfulness in the form of a fair breakfast—as good as could be expected under such adverse circumstances.

The wood that she strove to make burn in a sheet-iron camp stove was simply sodden. It frizzled and fried and hissed and sputtered and smoked—oh, how it did smoke! Plainly, it was as much out of temper as the most irritable of the human victims of discomfort.

"Whar's Pearl?" asked her father, rather sharply.

"Let the pore critter rest," urged the mother, soothingly. "It's enough for them of us to be in this pickle as have learned to bear with the crosses an' trials o' this life. Let the pore critter rest, I say. She's in trouble enough of her own, pore thing!"

"She'd orter be up seein that her mother don't slave—"

"Thar! thar, Jason! Don't bother about me. You're a pore critter of a man. It ain't to be expected that you know how to bear with a young girl in her trouble. Law me! I was a young girl myself once—a long time ago!—a long time ago, Jason! 'M-h'm!'"

And the old woman shook her head and sighed with depressing recollection.

"That's all well enough, Huldry," said her husband. "But right's right, an' wrong never kin be right. It's a daughter's place—"

"Thar never was a daughter that knew it or filled it better'n Pearl," insisted her mother stoutly. "I hain't never had nothin' to complain of since she could toddle. She's always been a blessin' an' a stay to me, Jason; an' you know what she has been to 'you, bless her heart!'"

But Pancoast chose not to think of that just now.

"Pearl!" he called sharply.

"Hush! hush!" pleaded the mother. "It won't do no good to let everybody see that you're displeased with her. Do you want to shame her before 'em all? Go call her quiet, if you must have her, though I don't see what for. Or, here—let me."

Pancoast was glad enough to delegate the office of calling his daughter.

The mother went to the wagon Pearl had occupied, and returned saying that it was empty.

"She's gone out for a ride by herself, like as not. She's feelin' mighty bad, Jason," urged the mother. "You'd orter be patient with her for a spell. You can't be expected to enter into the feelin's of a young girl like her mother can. It's a power o' trouble, this love-makin'; an' she sot a heap by him, Jason."

Pancoast growled an oath behind his beard, and strode away.

Before long he found his way back, and with no clearly-defined purpose, strolled up to Pearl's wagon and looked in.

What he wanted to see was something that belonged to her, something with the old associations before the shadow that had fallen between them.

It is probable that, if he had found her there, in the hunger of his heart he would have made such overtures to her as would have brought them together again in the old love and confidence.

But his alert eye saw what the woman's less practiced observation had overlooked. He detected the rent in the canvas.

There was a start; then, without a word or sound of alarm, he stepped quickly round to the side of the wagon.

A glance showed that the canvas had been cut.

Who had cut it? Why?

The question immediately followed—was it not strange that Pearl should choose such a morning for a ride?

Among other virtues, Jason Pancoast had one very desirable for everybody. He seldom "went off half-cocked."

Saying nothing to alarm the mother, he strode across the camp, with a step which was prompt without being so hurried as to pique curiosity, to where the horses were tethered.

Not one was missing.

Back to the wagon, and a hurried yet searching examination of the ground. Then swift decision, and a stern summons of his friends.

They came running, with looks of alarmed inquiry. They had heard that in the father's voice which told of calamity. His face confirmed the presage.

"Look!—here, and here, and here!" he cried, pointing out the cut tilt and the trail—the imprint of a man's boot beside the smaller footstep of a woman.

"Do you know who has done this thing?"

He was choking. He could scarcely speak articulately.

"What is it, Cap! What is the matter?" asked a voice.

"She's gone!—stolen away!"

As he said that, it seemed as if the strong man would burst into tears.

"Oh, not so bad as that," urged Aleck Hoover. "She's gone out to ride—she often does. Don't take on, Cap. We'll find her fast enough."

"Boys, every one that kin find a hoss—quick!"

"Git yer hosses; but before ye do, I want a word with ye. Hold on!—we ain't goin' in a permiscuous crowd."

They stopped to hear him. Never had they seen so terrible a look on his face.

"Thar ain't no use blinkin' the matter," he went on. "I know what's happened. An' I know what I want."

"You kin git it, Cap—whatever you ask fur," declared Hoover, in a way which showed that he too saw the full gravity of the situation.

"I want blood!" cried the distressed father, striking the wagon with his clinched fist.

"Ye shall have it before we let up on this hyar," promised Aleck, for himself and his mates.

Looks and voices showed that they were with him.

"That hound has robbed me!" cried stout Jason Pancoast, his voice breaking. "I want his blood! Who's with me?"

He looked around upon the excited faces that thronged about him.

A unanimous yell was his answer. One and all, they were with him.

"What is it, Jason? Whar's Pearl?" asked his wife, forcing her way through the crowd.

"Take her away! Don't let her come hyar! But what's the use? She's got to know. Your daughter has run away with— Oh, curse him! To horse! To horse! We air losin' time."

The distracted man broke through the crowd, and rushed toward the grazing horses. The mother fell to moaning and wringing her hands helplessly.

But Jason Pancoast pulled himself up.

"Wait! wait! This hyar ain't no way to go about it. I want men that I kin tie to—not too many of 'em, but good 'uns."

As he was surrounded again by all the impetuous young fellows, eager for an adventure that would set their blood to spinning, he looked them over with a critical eye.

"I'm 'lowin' to bind you," he said—"you what go along o' me. I want you to swear to shoot that cuss on sight. Ef thar's ary weak-kneed ones among ye—"

But they almost mobbed him in their eagerness to prove that the common enemy should find no mercy at their hands.

"Pick 'em out, Aleck," he said. "You know 'em as well as I do. I can't take ye all, boys, though I'm obleeged to ye fur your good-will."

"How many shall we want?" asked Hoover.

"An even dozen order do you. He's got back-in', o' course; but we can't strip the camp."

Aleck was immovable in his elections and rejections.

"I'd like to take ye all, boys—you know that. But I'm takin' ye by yer fightin' weight, the best I know. Some o' them as goes along won't come back, maybe."

As if this prospect would deter any one! It made them all the more eager to go.

Finally the last petition had been denied, and the rejected resigned themselves to their fate, while the chosen dozen were busy catching horses and drawing surcingle tight, looking to weapons and securing such provisions as they could take with them.

Men of the West know how to make haste slowly. No one could guess how long or short might be the trail they were setting out upon. Nothing could be gained by going off half prepared. A good, substantial breakfast before setting out was well worth waiting for.

Then away!—to return, when? how?

They found the spot where Seth had mounted his captive; and the father's heart ached as he thought that this had been planned while his daughter had been away the previous day.

The trail bearing straight to the westward, was not difficult to follow; and mile after mile they galloped in the tracks of the fugitive.

It was lucky that Aleck Hoover was virtually in charge, Jason Pancoast relying upon his judgment as against his own impatience.

If only the father's love and fears had been their guide, they would have run their horses' legs off of them at the outset, and then been "nowhar."

Hoover regulated the pace of their horses, and called a halt when it was needed for the recuperation of man and beast. Both must have food; both must have rest.

Seth Wendover had secured mounts of such speed and bottom that he could defy the hardest riding his pursuers were capable of.

They saw where he had halted, evidently only to afford Pearl brief periods of rest.

These indications of forced flight filled the father with fears of failure. While his men paused to eat and ease their aching joints, he pressed on, walking, that his horse might rest, though he allowed himself none.

At night he set out thus alone, arranging to guide his followers by signal smokes at dawn, so that they could take advantage of any deviation in the trail, and shorten the distance by making a bee-line to the spot.

In vain did Aleck protest.

"Wear myself out!" cried the father. "Not while this fire burns in my veins. After that, it don't matter."

He went; and that was the last they saw of him.

There were no signal smokes in the morning, as he had promised; and they followed his trail till they found where he seemed to have run into an ambush.

"They've got the ole man, boys!" cried Aleck Hoover, as he gazed down at the confused hoof-marks. "Cap Adair ain't no slouch. He figgered on this thing, an' he got it down fine, you bet! I 'lowed it was queer if he'd gone into this thing without backin'. But then, if the girl was willin', he could do that too."

"What's to be did, pard?" asked one of the men. "Adair he keeps right on; but his crowd has carried the ole man off hyar. Which'll we foller? We can't take both."

"We'll keep on after the girl. Cap 'u'd want us to do that," was Aleck's final decision, after a moment's puzzled thought.

"An' run into another ambush, like as not!"

"We'll keep our eyes peeled, an' resk it."

"Thar's enough of 'em to bag us ef we follered the ole man, anyway."

"Like as not. But that's neither 'hyar nor thar. The question is, what would he want us to do ef he could give us our orders?"

So they continued the original pursuit, leaving Jason Pancoast to his fate.

And what was that fate?

Leaving his horse to graze with theirs, he had gone off on foot, bearing a torch with which to make out the trail in the darkness.

Not less than five miles had he thus laboriously picked his way, traversing several belts of timber, so that he had long since been lost to the sight of his men, when he finally came to a watercourse where the fugitive seemed to have made the first attempt to "blind" his trail.

Up and down the stream, on either bank, the searcher went, scanning every inch of the ground, only to find himself back, baffled, at the point where he had lost the trail.

He had been too impatient. He had not persisted long enough in one direction. His men, who came after him in the morning, succeeded with no great difficulty where he had failed. But there were enough of them to man both banks in either direction; and all they had to do was to keep riding till they came to the spot where the fugitive had emerged from the water. Then too, distances seem greater in the darkness, and with the slow progress necessitated by torch-light.

Back again, as we have said, to the point where the trail went down into the water, came the tired and discouraged man. Was it a wonder that he sat down dejectedly on the bank?

"They're goin' to give me the slip!" he said.

"I feel it in my bones!"

And he bowed his head on his hands; and it may be that a hot tear forced its way through his burning eyelids, and trickled down his beard.

But the snapping of a twig caused him to leap to his feet, and snatch at his revolver.

He had stuck his torch into the yielding loam of the river-bank; and its smoky red flame cast but a small circle of doubtful illumination around.

Within that circle, however, he saw a man standing with folded arms, and regarding him with a derisive smile.

"Hard luck, partner!" was all the stranger said.

"Who be you?" demanded the boomer-chief, holding his weapon in readiness at his side.

"One who has come to take you in out of the wet," was the bantering response.

"You'll have to git up airly to take me in out of the wet, whoever you be!" retorted Pancoast.

"Oh, no!—I guess not."

"Oh, yes!—I guess so."

"What'll you bet on it?"

"I'll bet my life ag'in' yours."

"That's a big stake. You've got a deal sure thing, I reckon."

"I've got the drop on you, if that's what you call it."

"It won't do you no good, stranger."

"What's the reason it won't? It'll sour your hash, for one thing."

"Not to-night."

"You bet I ain't waitin' for mornin', ef you don't show up before all your gas runs to waste."

"Take a look around, pardner before you open your battery—do!"

"Take a look around?"

"Swing that torch of yours over your head, an' see what you see."

"An' see how quick you kin turn the tables on me. Presto change!—an' you've got the drop, an' I'm nowhar! Excuse me, ef you please!"

"Oh, I ain't half so sharp as that. Ef I had been, would I have stood myself up hyar fur you to shoot at?"

And the stranger grinned.

The argument was unanswerable. Pancoast saw that he must hold the stranger at his mercy only in seeming.

"Besides," pursued the unknown, "you kin hold me, hands up."

And he proved that he had no intention of securing what he might have had from the first by putting up his hands above his head.

Not a little chagrined, Jason Pancoast caught up the torch, and swung it, as he had been directed, in the air.

The red glare glistened on the muzzles of carbines that made a frowning circle about his.

The men who menaced him thus were all hidden behind copes of dense foliage.

"Air you satisfied?" asked the stranger, as Pancoast's jaw dropped in astonishment.

"You've got me," said the boomer chief, "whoever you be. What do you want o' me?"

And as if to show that his capitulation was without reserve, he put up his revolver.

"That's sensible," remarked the other, approvingly. "You an' I'll git along comfortable, after all."

"Who be you?"

"Your would-be host."

"Who sent you after me?"

"You will learn that after we have had a chance to show you what sort of entertainment we can offer you."

"I reckon thar ain't much use o' chin-music. But I will say this. Ef you're in the pay o' Cap Adair, you might as well put a slug through me first as last. Ef you ain't in his pay, then I'll make you an offer. I'm in a bad way. I want my time now worse'n I ever wanted it before in my life, an' worse'n I'm like ever to want it ag'in. Ef you'll let up on me, I'll bind myself to send you any ransom you say within my means, ef it takes every stiver I've got. Not only this. I'll put myself in your hands again, any time you say, an' anywhar, after this day next week. I reckon that 'll be time enough fur what I've got to do. Ef I ain't dead before then, I'll either have what I'm after, or I'll have give it up. What do you say? Go easy on me, stranger—as easy as you rightly kin."

"I'd like to give you a show, pardner—I would so. But I'm obeyin' orders."

"Cap Adair's orders?"

"I didn't say so."

"Take me in! I hain't got nothin' more to say."

With set teeth and clinched fists Jason Pancoast dropped his head on his breast, and stood the picture of abject submission. Fate had crushed him, so it seemed.

"I'm sorry fur you, pardner," said the other, advancing as if to take him prisoner.

He was a little premature with his sympathy, as it proved!

With a bound Jason Pancoast seized him, and lifting him clear off the ground, rushed with him straight for the circle of frowning carbines.

Of course it was impossible for the men to shoot, and so peril the life of their leader as greatly as they did that of their supposed prisoner.

Through the line he crashed with so impetuous a rush that there was no stopping him.

"Drop yer carbines! Grapple him!" shouted the strange captive, kicking wildly in the air.

They did so; but the man they sought to detain seemed no longer human. He was an incarnate whirlwind.

Of course so tremendous an exertion of force could be but momentary. What was to be done must be done while the breath was held.

Knowing this, the boomer leader hurled the man he had snatched up off the ground into the circle of his friends, so breaking a path for his own exit.

Even as he leaped through it, he drew his revolvers, and began to fire to the right and to the left.

Never was a bolder dash for liberty. Never was a forlorn hope so quickly changed. He was through the circle, and away! His enemies were in confusion.

But fate was against him. He tripped, and fell!

Like hounds upon a fallen deer, they leaped upon him. As they clutched him, they uttered snarls, like contending animals.

Desperately he fought. But he was pinned down, and one brawny fellow held him while the rest disentangled themselves.

When they lifted him to his feet, he was a prisoner securely bound.

"Boss," said his captor, with unequivocal admiration, "you deserve to have got away. I never see nothin' quite so han'some. One o' these days, when you're in the humor for it, I'll give you my hand on it."

And he rubbed the trickling blood from his forehead entirely without malice.

Jason Pancoast answered not a word. Now he was a broken man.

CHAPTER XXI.

A LOITERING LOVER.

"It is an outrage!" cried witch Ethel—as some one we know was fond of calling her—stamping her little foot with pretty rage.

"My dear!" protested Carl Berkhardt; and as no notice was taken of the tender term, it is to be presumed that he now had the right to use it.

"But he promised," insisted Ethel.

"Promised!" ejaculated Berkhardt, with a slight elevation of his shoulders and brows

"What saith the sage? Promises are ropes of sand!"

"No gentleman breaks a promise, however trifling."

"If he can help it."

"Help it! He is bound to help it!"

"Must I quote the sinner after the sage? We are, all of us, constantly doing that which we ought not to do, and leaving undone those things which we ought to do, and there is no health in us!"

It was plain that Berkhardt was determined not to take the matter too seriously.

"I have a mind to shake you!" cried Ethel, favoring her lover with a most bewitching look of impatience.

"You mean," corrected Carl, "that you have a mind to take hold of me and shake yourself. Try it—do!"

"You are the most provoking thing I ever saw," declared his sweetheart, for so her manner marked her. "You may laugh, but I tell you it is no laughing matter. You ought to see her. She is nearly distracted."

"Over a delay of an hour or two! Why, even you are not so exacting."

"If I have no right to be. I have no claim upon any one; nor has any one any claim upon me. Pray don't forget that, sir!"

She tossed her head pertly.

"We'll discuss that later," said Carl, not much dismayed at this declaration of freedom.

"But I insist that your friend is altogether too familiar with the Green-eyed Monster. I wish Adair joy of her; but—"

"Silence! This is high treason! Do you think I will stand and hear my friend—my particular friend—defamed? Poor dear Ada is perfectly right; and you are a lot of brutes to treat us so!"

"Come! come! I am willing to bear my share of the common burden of humanity for Adam's fault—and especially Eve's; don't forget that!—but I'll be hanged if I will suffer for Owen Adair's infirmities!"

As another mark of the progress Carl was making, on the day of the barbecue he apologized for the accidental escape of the expletive "by Jove!" while now he went on quite unconscious of the equally questionable "I'll be hanged!"

"Wasn't I on hand in time? You might have seen me hanging round at cock-crow, but for the chance of getting a shot from some sleepy sentinel. I didn't want to run the risk of depriving you, madame, of a very attentive lover and an equally devoted husband."

"How very considerate you are!" laughed Ethel. "But, seriously, Carl, poor Ada has some excuse for her uneasiness. What should I do, you silly boy, if I lived in momentary dread of your playing me some unexpected trick?"

"Like the Little Joker in thimble-rig, eh? Now you see it, and now you don't see it!"

"Nonsense! But, really, you don't know what she has gone through. The best of you isn't worth it!"

"Ah, me!" sighed Carl, dolefully shaking his head. "The course of true love never did run smooth—except in our case, my dear!"

"It runs altogether too smooth. You don't know how to appreciate me!"

"You are of ines—"

"Hush! Here she comes! Oh! oh! oh!"

Ada made her appearance smiling, but so ghastly pale that Ethel involuntarily clutched the warm hand of her lover.

"Is there any use of further delay?" she asked. "Our way lies in the direction of the ranch, you know, and we shall probably meet Mr. Adair."

Ethel groaned again in spirit, though her lips smiled with her ordinary social mask.

Was it possible that her haughty friend could so humble her pride as to propose to go in quest of a man who failed to keep his engagement with her?

"The very thing!" was what Ethel said, with great apparent enthusiasm.

If she could only have known! What she had seen of Ada's experience was as nothing compared with the reality.

The girl had awakened that morning out of a dream which left no recollection, but only a vague sense of depression, which she at once construed as a premonition of impending evil.

She awaited the hour of Owen's coming with growing anxiety, and when it passed without bringing him, she stood breathless, as white as marble.

It was then that Ethel had seen her, when she ran to her room to see if she was dressed for their contemplated ride.

Carl had been on hand for some time, and she had been having a delightful time with him, when a rider was descried who was supposed to be Owen.

"He is coming, riding like the wind!" she had announced, as she burst into the door.

Ada lifted her hand to her heart, and for a moment it seemed as if she were about to faint.

But with a mighty effort she regained her self-composure, and said, with affected carelessness:

"I will be out in a moment. Thank you."

Checking the impulse to throw her arms

about her friend and chide her for her doubts, Ethel discreetly withdrew.

What followed immediately upon the closing of the door showed how great had been the strain Ada had withstood.

With a sort of reeling half-turn, she sunk upon her knees before her bed, dropping her face upon it.

There was an agonizing burst of tears that lasted for thirty seconds. Then she arose and carefully obliterated every trace of disturbance.

She stood before the glass marshaling her features into a look of agreeable composure, when a light step approached the door, followed by a timid knock.

She went to the door and opened it, and the moment she saw Ethel's face, knew what the girl had returned for.

"Oh, you are looking lovely, dear," declared Ethel, entering the room, instead of waiting for her friend to come out.

Then she stated the real business of her coming so soon again.

"But we were mistaken. It proved to be somebody else than Mr. Adair, on coming nearer. Do you care to go out yet? I have discovered the proverbial stitch in time; and, for once in my life, I am going to avail myself of the delay, to take it, just to see how it seems. I shan't be a minute."

She kissed Ada on the cheek, with a little deprecating laugh, and flitted out of the room and into her own, with the pretense of not knowing that she had just dropped a thunderbolt at her friend's feet.

But the cheek she touched with her warm lips had sent a chill through her veins. The stony eyes from which she averted her own had thrilled her with a tingling pain.

Ada did not cast herself again upon her knees. She stood a long time motionless, staring into vacancy.

"It has come!" she said at last, in a cold, evenly-modulated voice. "I might have known it."

Then she sat down, dressed as she was for her ride, and watched the slow-moving hand of the clock, that remorseless index of the flight of time.

"It has come!" she kept repeating, and never moved further while the hand made two complete rounds of the dial.

Ethel did not return. She had not the courage. From the first there had been no confidence between her and Ada regarding her unhappy love. She could neither console nor cheer. She was forced to pretend that she saw nothing unusual in what was going on.

The face that she had caught that last glimpse of haunted her, so that she was glad to creep close to Carl, and be unusually kind to him.

This was the justification of her indignant condemnation of Owen, whom she really liked very much indeed; and now Ada had made her appearance with the strange proposal, which really meant that they should go in quest of the delinquent.

Carl, being a man, thought this a very sensible thing to do; but Ethel knew that no woman would ordinarily put herself in so humiliating a position.

To Carl, Ada's smile was only the polished manner of a rather haughty woman of society; to Ethel it was almost as painful as a grinning death's-head.

What was passing behind that stony mask? What had passed in those two hours of waiting?

It was a very simple matter. Ada had come to the resolution to know the worst, and without further delay.

One thing she had done of which no one who knew her would have thought her capable—taking into account all it might imply.

She had opened her trunk, and from its morocco case had taken a very small, highly-finished revolver, looked carefully to its loading, and secreted it in the bosom of her riding-habit.

What a monitor, to knock against her heart with every rise and fall of her horse, as she rode to meet her lover!

How little did innocent witch Ethel guess to what she was smiling acquiescence, with the polite hypocrisy which society imposes on all its devotees. She could not dream the tragic possibilities of this nature, of which she had as yet seen only the outside.

So with seeming gayety they rode away from the fort. How false the seeming!

"I say, Bill! How'd ye like to be one o' them nobes, with nothin' to do all day long but sashay around the country, an' cut up high jinks with the dames?"

"I reckon thar's a streak o' fat an' a streak o' lean in that, as well as in most ev'rythin' else in this hyar wicked world," answered Bill, philosophically.

"I'd like the chance to grease the hard road I have to travel with some o' that thar same kind o' fat—blow me if I wouldn't! I'd take the lean without no growlin'."

"I manage to git along purty comfortable with a pipe an' the soft side o' a plank. I tell ye what it is, Bob—when you've seen as much o' this hyar circus what we call livin' as I have,

you'll about make up your mind thar ain't nothin' in this world like gittin' right down to hard-pan, an' makin' the most o' what comes to hand. Rich or poor, you've got to take your reg'lar gruel one way or another, bet yer sweet life! The sickest man I ever see was one what hadn't nothin' in God's world to trouble him. The only man I'd trade with now, knowin' what I do o' what's what, worked from six o'clock in the mornin' till ten o'clock at night, year out an' year in, with nary a holiday but Sundays, an' no amusement but what he could git out of a wife an' fourteen brats an' a clay pipe. God bless the man what invented a clay pipe; says I!"

"Say, Bill! What did that thar model chap o' you'n do fur a livin'?"

"Shoemakin'."

"Waal, I'll be hanged! You'd make a blame good preacher, you would! You've missed your callin'."

"I'd make a mighty poor nob, as you call it; an' so would you."

"I'd like to try my hand at it a spell, anyway. I'd swap shoes with ary one o' them three."

The speakers stood in an angle of the wall, so that their voices, favored also by the wind, were projected further than they thought. Besides, Ada Savoy was as keen of hearing as of sight; and during a momentary pause, while she waited for the adjustment of Ethel's stirrup, she caught the substance of the discussion.

"Poor fool!" she reflected bitterly, "he would be more eager to swap back, if he were shod with the flames of hell that are bearing me on my mission!"

Yet she rode with onward calm, the slumbrous fire of her soul finding vent only in the unnatural brilliancy of her eyes.

When the point was reached where the line of their projected excursion diverged from the way to Owen Adair's ranch, Ethel, without drawing rein, remarked with a smile:

"We might as well keep on, seeing we have come so far, till we meet Mr. Adair, or surprise him at home in the midst of business."

And Ada, smiling back, assented:

"Certainly!"

Whereupon Carl, to himself:

"It takes a woman, by Jove!"

And he almost lost himself in an unguarded whistle.

Ada's eyes looked straight ahead, and when they came in sight of the ranch, fastened upon it, never to be removed till they dashed up to the door.

"Hallo the house!" shouted Carl, with an affection of gayety he was far from feeling.

He had been watching Ada's set face; and gradually the distress that underlay Ethel's persistent smile, slowly killing it out, and crushing her into silence, had pierced his armor of masculine stoicism.

Ethel sat her horse in mute anxiety, no longer able to dissemble her feelings.

"Every step has borne us nearer to the inevitable tragedy," she was saying to herself. "What was the use of this painful pretense? Oh, it is terrible! I shall never forgive him! And how could she? She must have guessed!"

By "tragedy" she meant a woman's humiliation—nothing more.

There was no need of Carl's hail. He still kept up the pretense that had brought them thus far, by affecting to summon Owen from some recess where he had not seen their approach. In fact he did not believe that his friend was within miles of the range of his voice.

They were greeted by a great rout of dogs, which brought men from the stables and women from the house.

On the heels of his hail, Carl proceeded to address one of these.

"Where is Captain Adair?"

"We was 'lowin' as how he'd staid over at the Fort, bein's most likely as he was thar yistiddy," answered one of the men.

"Yesterday? But isn't he home to-day?"

"He ain't nowars hyarabouts."

"But he returned last night?"

"Not to this house. Wa'n't he at the Fort yistiddy?"

"Certainly. But he left there late last night, intending to return home."

"He never got hyar."

"But that is strange. Where could he have gon'?"

"That I don't know."

"Do you know of any business that would probably call him away just now? Who is there who would be likely to be in his confidence in such matters?"

"Most likely me, if anybody."

"And you know of nothing?"

"Nothin'. That is to say, nothin' but some business he had hyar. Hyar's a gent waitin' fur to see him. He had an app'intment with him airly this mornin'."

The man referred to looked from one to another of the new arrivals with that blank expression of appeal with which one submits himself to inspection under such circumstances—a look of mild injury, which seemed to say:

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SPIDER.

"You see me hyar. I've waited a purty considerable spell. Ef anybody has a right to complain, I reckon it's yer humble sarvant. Do you 'low as I'm bein' used jest right?"

But when his eyes reached Ada Savoy's face, the expression of his own changed abruptly. He dropped his jaw, and stared at her in unmistakable forgetfulness of his own petty annoyance.

Carl followed the direction of his eyes, and was himself thrilled into silence.

As white as death, Ada with a touch of the spur pressed forward.

"You had every reason to expect your master here to-day?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And you, sir!—was your business with him of importance?"

"Thar was a few hundred dollars in it. Not much to him, I reckon, but purty considerable to me. I'm a poor man, myself."

"Enough so that he would probably be here, if he could without great inconvenience? And his appointment with you was positive?"

"He said he'd be hyar. I've come a good ways—he knowed that. I'd like to git away as quick as I kin."

After he ceased speaking, the girl sat staring at him, with a slight swaying motion in her saddle, for perhaps the space of ten seconds; and then she said, as if it just occurred to her after a momentary aberration of mind:

"Thank you!"

She did not seem to see him while she said it, there was such a strange expression of distance in her eyes.

Then with a labored respiration, as if a painful weight oppressed her breast, she turned to Ethel.

"Will you oblige me," she asked, "by returning to the Fort, or continuing on the excursion we contemplated, and leaving me here alone?"

"Alone? Oh, Ada!—what can you do here?" exclaimed Ethel, for once thrown completely off her guard, and so forgetting polite conventionalities, ordinarily observed by her with so nice care.

"Do not think strangely of me," answered the girl, still with that far-away expression, as if her thoughts were not on the person she was addressing. "I beg that you will think as little as possible about me. Let me have my way; and believe that I shall never forget your consideration—all—through—this—"

She did not complete the sentence.

Ethel experienced a horrible sensation, as if she were in converse with one insane.

It seemed to her that the speaker was so busy with other thoughts, that she forgot what she was saying, and all her immediate surroundings, in the midst of her discourse.

This was the first intimation Ada had given that she was conscious of any tactful kindness on Ethel's part, so thoroughly had all that was unusual in her past conduct been ignored.

But what ought to be done when things had reached their present direful state? Before, the situation was full of pain; now, it was full of terror!

In her helplessness, Ethel turned to Carl.

He who had left all to her woman's instinct and tact thus far, now suddenly asserted the sway of manhood.

With a firm restraining clasp on her wrist, he said, in a low tone:

"Perhaps Miss Savoy knows best."

Ethel yielded with the docility which was fast supplanting the lightsome caprice of her nature, when Carl expressed a serious preference.

But she could no longer hide her bleeding heart, her yearning sympathy. Tears welled into her eyes; and throwing her arms about her friend, she murmured brokenly:

"Oh, Ada! oh, my dear!"

"Hush! hush!" admonished the other. "I shall never forget your kindness."

And so they parted.

"Oh, what, what will become of her? She is not herself at all. I am afraid to leave her in such a mood," sighed tender-hearted Ethel, as she rode away from the ranch secure in her own happier fate.

"There are paths that, like the way of death, we must all walk alone," said Carl, gravely. "It is a wretched business truly; but I hope it will turn out less unfortunately than you fear. I am surprised at Adair. He doesn't seem to know his own mind. But sometimes it is better to cut these tangled skeins at once than to spend a lifetime trying to unsnarl them."

But this was rank heresy to Ethel.

"Some ill-natured person might say the same of the tie that binds us!" she exclaimed, looking at him with tearful reproach.

Of course Carl was at no loss for arguments to prove to her that it was by no means a parallel case.

Meanwhile Ada sat like a statue in bronze, watching them till they disappeared. Then, suddenly arousing, she cast a glance about her, and to the astonishment of the good people of the ranch, who did not presume to disturb her, spurred her horse at a wild gallop straightaway across the prairie, regardless of any beaten trail.

It was not significant to them that she was making a bee-line for Colonel Flood's ranch.

THERE were suggestions of the South in Colonel Flood's ranch. One of them was such a veranda as might have run the length of any plantation house.

True, it was not screened by trailing vines, nor was it bowered in the foliage of luxuriant shrubbery.

A woman might have made some attempt to drape it in color; but the colonel had no eye for such things.

To him a house was a shelter from the weather. The veranda, rude and bare, was the one out-cropping of early reminiscence.

On this veranda, then, sat the appropriator of all the country within sight—spoils of the heathen, as we have said.

A rocking-chair, a cigar, and a newspaper of reasonably recent date, were the items that went to make up his seemingly unmixed comfort.

With his feet on the balustrade, and the newspaper held so that all of the upper part of his body was hidden behind it, it was probably natural that he should remain unconscious of the approach of a rider, even of the bewitching sex, till he was startled from his absorption in politics or market quotations by the thud of her horse's hoofs quite close at hand.

Then he lowered the paper to his knees, and looked across it with marked surprise—to all outward seeming.

There was the momentary hesitation of incredulous amazement, then the smiling alacrity of one who acknowledges himself equally honored and delighted.

"My dear Miss Savoy! What propitious stars are in conjunction in my horoscope? No devotee ever felt his unworthiness more keenly, I do assure you! This is a—"

"I am in no mood for trifling!" interrupted the girl, in a low, hoarse, rasping voice, as she rode quite close up to him, where he had come down off the veranda. "Will you follow me? What I have to say is not for the ears of your servants—not yet. Will you provide yourself with a horse?"

The colonel looked at her in surprise, but accepted the gravity of the occasion without question.

"I am at your service, of course," he answered.

A word to some men who were overhauling harness before the stables procured him a mount, and he swung into the saddle and followed Ada as she headed her horse toward a neighboring chaparral.

She had ridden through it before he overtook her. As he emerged from the trees on the further side, he found her confronting him with a look of iron determination in her face.

"Where is Owen Adair?" she demanded, without giving him time to speak.

He answered without hesitation or evasion, to all outward seeming. His mood seemed quite changed from that of the day when he left her fainting in the dell almost within gun-shot of where they now stood.

The sarcasm of that hour of antagonism was replaced by the conciliatory moderation of one not disposed to strike a fallen foe.

"I have heard what has happened," he admitted; "and if you regret it, I am willing to give you my sympathy. I thought it had simplified matters very nicely, by relieving you of all awkwardness. But I confess that I do not see why you should come to me with your present demand. Do you think it likely that I should be in Captain Adair's confidence in such a matter? I assure you he has taken me quite pleasantly by surprise."

The girl listened to what he had to say with stony immobility, and with equally stony immobility renewed her exaction.

"What have you done with Owen Adair?"

"What have I done with him? I?"

"What have you done with him, or caused to be done with him?"

"My dear Miss Savoy—"

The colonel began with the indulgent smile of one too absurdly arraigned for serious defense.

Ada interrupted him with iron inflexibility of purpose.

"Have you had the courage to murder him outright?"

The colonel lifted his hat with a mocking bow. His old Mephistophelean irony returned.

"I will not return your compliment as I might, did not your charming sex rightly claim every indulgence. I will not even intimate that your curious suspicion might be considered a possible reflex of your own innocent day-dreams. But you—"

His counter-charge thrilled through the listener so as to string every muscle in her body to sudden rigidity, and goad her into speech.

"Beaufort Flood, you are standing on the verge of an open grave!" she declared, icily. "Once more I demand of you, where is Owen Adair? If you have killed him, you shall show me his body; if you hold him alive, you shall lead me to him. You menaced me, and because I yet held the hope of life, you were able to crush me to your feet. Now your malice is

powerless against me, because I have abandoned that hope. Now I am as desperate as you—even more so; and I am resolved that you shall not wreck my life, though you may be able to force me to my own destruction. I will be frank with you: I mean to baffle you, and then throw myself upon the gratitude of the man who shall know that, if I was ready to jeopard his life for my own sake, I am not less willing to peril my life for his—and both because I love him. Stand out against me in this, and I will shoot you where you sit. Now, my answer?"

True to her word, she drew the revolver with which she had provided herself before setting out, and leveled it so accurately at the point just between the colonel's eyes, that he sighted along the barrel to her eye, and saw how accurate and steady was her aim.

Only a moment did she favor him with this test, just to show that she could strike with the deadly certainty of the cobra if the occasion demanded.

Then she lowered the weapon to a place of rest and readiness.

"She's no slouch!" acknowledged the colonel to himself. "There's no buncombe or bluff about her. She means business!"

However, though he fully realized the seriousness of the situation, he evinced no perturbation. His color did not change; his eyes did not waver; his voice lost not a shade of its wonted virility.

"There seems to be a slight misunderstanding," he began.

Ada interrupted him with her first show of feminine impetuosity.

"There is no misunderstanding!"

"Allow me!" he protested, with mock suavity.

"Go on," she assented, annoyed at herself for her momentary slip.

"There seems to be a slight misunderstanding," he repeated, deliberately. "You speak as if under the impression that Captain Adair had been spirited off alone."

"Alone, or in company with others," she began, with the overbearing imperiousness with which one sweeps trifles aside.

But it was now the colonel's turn to interrupt.

"If you will allow me, I would submit that, under certain circumstances, the alternative which you dispose of so summarily might make considerable difference—all the difference, in fact, between your holding me responsible for Captain Adair, and your calling him to account for himself."

What was it he said? The words cut through her like the keen blade of a Corsican stiletto! Call Owen to account! What for? For the company in which he had disappeared!

For one instant the truth (as it seemed to her then)—in fact, the implication of the colonel—flashed upon her, only to be repudiated by the gathering into one mighty effort of every energy of her nature; as the lightning reveals every minute detail of a landscape, created and annihilated by the same fiat, as it were.

Then she said, with a curl of the lip:

"You may be talking against time, on the chance of something or somebody turning up: you may hope to take advantage of a momentary distraction to turn the tables on me. You will have no such favorable opportunity. I shall not lose my wits, and on the appearance of any one likely to interfere in your behalf, I shall make sure of you, and do what I can to rescue your victim afterward."

"That is a highly dramatic programme," sneered the colonel. "Notwithstanding, I still think you will do well to listen to me. The fact can be stated in half a dozen words. It is at your service, if you wish it. If not, I am at your mercy. I do not try to disguise that fact, nor do I delude myself with any illusions about the capabilities of your sex. I have seen some rare specimens perform in my day!"

"Let me hear what you call *the fact*, if it can be stated so briefly."

"The fact, then, is simply this: There is a striking coincidence between the disappearance of my victim, as you will have it, and his possible victim—the beautiful, if not accomplished, daughter of the boomer leader, Jason Panceast. It seemed to me well not to leave this fact out of your calculations."

As if she had been struck by lightning, Ada Savoy swayed in her saddle, her arm falling limp at her side, and the weapon but now held so steadily almost slipping from her nerveless grasp.

Only a moment thus. Then, recovering as quickly, she leveled the fatal instrument again at the man who sat immovable before her, almost shrieking:

"You lie!"

There is a sting to that word shared by no other. Perhaps because it is so short and sharp. The colonel for the first time changed color, though it was hurled at him by a woman.

But he smiled nevertheless, though it was possible that in the frenzy of the moment the woman might carry her resentment to fatal lengths.

"Allow me to commend to your notice another fact," he went on, coolly, "to wit: that I just now made no effort to turn the tables on you, as you put it; though you must confess that you in-

cautiously gave me ample opportunity. You may not have lived long enough in the West to learn the fatal celerity acquired in getting what is called *the drop*. He would have been a bungler indeed who could not have availed himself of your momentary distraction—if you will allow me to quote you again. Suppose, then, that you put that toy up, and let us face the facts in this case in a common-sense way."

What he said was so true that it could not but appeal to the woman's good sense.

From that moment she was convinced that her antagonist had so good a case that he could afford to extend to her every indulgence.

Without a word further she put up her weapon, as he recommended; but at the same time she broke down, covering her face with her hands in her abject wretchedness.

"Now," said the colonel, "that we have established an armistice, I hope for like success in the arrangement of an amicable alliance, looking to the furthering of my interests and your revenge. You see I am quite frank with you. That is my nature. Perhaps it would be more modest and nearer the mark to say, that I have found when honesty is, and when it is not, the best policy. It suits me just now to admit that I have no great love for Owen Adair. To put the case in a nutshell, he is in my way. I want him removed. He himself has given me my opportunity. I mean to avail myself of it if I can."

"It would be an easy matter to shoot him. I have my choice, of shooting him in the back, or calling him out under the code. In the first case, aside from personal prejudice against such a method, I should run the risk of an interview with Judge Lynch not at all to my taste. In the second, I should be certain to lose what little popularity I now possess. Adair is a good-looking young fellow whom everybody likes. I am a crabbed old scoundrel whom nobody particularly favors. *Ergo*: I must not kill him—with my own hand!"

"But a beautiful woman can do anything in this country, especially if she has a plausible grievance. As your abettor, I should become interesting, instead of execrable. It is the old distinction—tweedle-dum, and tweedle-dee!"

"This, then, is my proposal: I will help you to find the runaway, if you will agree to shoot him when found. That off our hands, I have another proposal to tender. I make no secret of it. You shall see your way to the end before you set out. You already know my respectful presumption. If my wooing has been a little stormy, I believe that is no barrier to a union far more satisfactory than the jogtrot that commonly passes under the name of marriage. My second proposal, then, will be, to save you from the consequences of your act, and be rewarded with the custody of your charming person for life."

"Give me my revenge!" cried Ada, with a sudden outburst, "and then ask anything you please."

As if to ratify this iniquitous bond, she thrust forward her hand.

The colonel lifted it to his lips with formal respect.

"But," cried the girl, suddenly snatching it away, "you must prove this. If you are deceiving me—"

"Could I afford to? If you are equal to the task, we need not delay."

"I am equal to anything. Lead on."

"Your horse is not fresh. If you will honor me by accepting a mount, the best blood in my stables, we can save considerable time."

Anything that promised to shorten her suspense was welcome; so, on the fleetest of the Kentuckian's stock, and backed by a sufficient body-guard of his men to make it safe to venture among enemies, they set out for the boomers' camp.

Oklahoma was not the first scene of Colonel Flood's enterprise, by any means. He had ranged cattle from Texas to Montana, and from the Missouri to the foot-hills. He had been in all sorts of cattle wars, hence had gathered about him a company of picked men, upon every one of whom he could rely to back him wherever he chose to lead.

It was a crowd of choice spirits, then, that he took into the boomers' camp. They dashed in with as little ceremony as if the boomers were but serfs, and the doughty colonel and his crew their masters of a conquering race.

Surly scowls were taken no account of, and the demand for information was peremptory.

"Where is Captain Pancoast?"

"He's gone off."

"Where?"

"That I don't know. He tends to his own business, he does!"

Of course the intimation of the tone was:

"Go and do likewise!"

"Come! come!" retorted the colonel, with the haughty overbearing of a commander, "I am not here for nonsense. I myself am thoroughly informed as to what has taken your leader away. What I want is, that you shall state the matter to this lady."

"You will tell me?" petitioned Ada, somewhat tremulously.

"He's gone gunnin' for one o' the scoundrels

o' your crowd," said the man, looking at the colonel. "Does that suit you?"

"Tolerably," answered the colonel, undisturbed. "Now, then—to be a little more explicit. After which particular scoundrel of my crowd, as you say?"

"Adair—!"

The boomer added a formidable expletive.

Under other circumstances Colonel Flood would have taken him to task for it, and forced him to apologize for the disrespect to the lady. Not to complicate matters just now, he ignored it, and went on:

"Very good! Will you tell us why he is looking for Captain Adair?"

But here another lip took up the tale.

"Let me see him! I want to git my eye on the robber!"

It was the wild, hysterical voice of a woman. She came elbowing her way through the crowd. It was Pearl's mother, almost frantic with grief.

"So you're one of 'em, be you?" she cried, standing within the circle gathered about the Cattle King and his dependents. "You're one o' the kings o' this country, that goes about stealin' poor folks's children away from 'em? And this hyar is one o' your women-folks, I reckon. I wonder how you'd take it—what you'd say—what you'd do—if one of our folks was to steal her in the night, and carry her the Lord only knows where to? I wonder the good Lord looks down on you, an' don't stamp you out, root an' branch! Oh Lord! oh Lord! oh Lord!"

She threw her hands up wildly, and burst into heart-broken sobs.

"Somebody kill me! I want my Pearl! I want my little girl!" she moaned. "Where have they taken her to? Why don't somebody do somethin'?"

The women of the camp, who had exhausted every consolation of speech, gathered about her sobbing, and while they sought to draw her from the spot with their arms about her, cast looks of unutterable hatred, upon the colonel, and not less upon Ada.

One would have expected the girl to be touched by the spectacle. Instead she regarded Mrs. Pancoast with hard hatred, as the mother of the girl who was the immediate cause of her own misery.

Forcing her horse so as to intercept her removal from the spot, she addressed her:

"Are you the mother of the—the girl they call Pearl Pancoast?" she asked.

"Of course she's her mother!" answered one of the women for her, angrily.

"Do you mean to say that the girl has been carried off?"

"Yes she has!" by the same self-appointed spokeswoman, in the same tart tone, Mrs. Pancoast repressing her outward grief to listen.

"Against her will?" persisted Ada, quivering in every nerve as she drew forth the intelligence that was filling her soul with the blackness of despair.

"Would she go if she could help it? Would you?" demanded the woman, with the anger of one who is forced by inquisition into making a good case by stating what he does not really believe.

"By whom?" asked Ada, careless of everything but the significant facts.

"Who was to do it but Cap Adair! She hated him and all of you!"

"Unless I am erroneously informed," interposed the colonel, dryly, "the girl quite recently saved his life, out of the hands of those who—loved him!"

Ada did not need this reminder. She knew of the lynching, and the rescue followed by a pistol-shot from the rescuer's own hand.

All this only showed the passionate nature of Pearl's love. Jealous to desperation, was it likely that her love would be less headlong? Then what easier than a reconciliation and elopement?

"Let us go!" she said, turning dizzily to Colonel Flood. "I have heard enough. Now find them for me!"

Her marble face, her scintillating eyes, showed that she was in proper condition for the work he had marked out for her.

He found the trail of pursued and pursuers, and set out upon it.

Ada Savoy rode like a Nemesis.

In the days that followed, she never relaxed that tense look of resolve. She knew no weariness.

"Let us reach the end!" was all she said.

And the end was reached. The hut in which Owen lay white and still, bathed in a flood of light from surrounding bonfires, a pistol-shot, and—

"They have killed him!" cried the girl, who till now had been as a monument of stone.

Then away she burst, mounted on Colonel Flood's fleetest mare.

In vain did he strive to overtake and detain her. She distanced him at every bound, till, flinging herself out of the saddle at the door of the hut, she rushed in, not ten seconds after a second shot rung out on the night.

Before the colonel got where he could see into the house, a woman's direful shriek was followed by a third and last shot.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A TEST OF LOVE.

In the dull apathy of one who has abandoned all hope in life, Pearl Pancoast awaited the return of her captor.

She had lost the lover on whom she had set her whole heart; she had the intimation of a plot against the life of her father, doubtless ere this carried into effect. Life held no promise else. Why should she care for the miserable remnant left her?

She had no doubt of Seth's intentions. He hoped to break her spirit, and then force her into a listlessly submissive union with himself.

She faced this prospect with a cold, dull, lifeless look in her eyes. If she had any plan of her own in reference to the matter, it lay hid below the surface.

Seth returned in evident good humor. Everything was turning out to his liking.

"Now I'm ready for a word with you," he began, presenting himself to Pearl, with a look of settled resolve in his eyes.

The girl at once gathered that this was merely formal. Whatever her reception of them, he would carry his purposes to completion unwaveringly.

"It were better to spare your breath, and inform me of your plans through your acts."

"It suits me better to talk the thing over. You see, I've changed my key. That ain't no use to beg an' whine when you've got the whip end. I'm 'lowin' to talk business now, without no ifs nor buts."

"What do you want of me, then, as briefly as you can put it?"

"I want you to marry me."

"You have had your answer in that matter. Let us be strictly business-like, and avoid ifs and buts. Now, what else? I shall be glad to dismiss you as soon as possible."

"It'll be some time before *you* dismiss *me*, madame! But I'm willin' to let your answer stand as final—for the present! The next thing, then, is, may I trouble you to come along o' me? I've got somethin' interestin' to show ye."

Pearl intimated her willingness to follow him at once.

He ordered all hands into the saddle; and they resumed their interrupted march.

An hour, however, brought them to the outlaws' hut where Owen Adair had last looked upon the light of the world.

The ruffians and Seth's own men were lounging about indiscriminately—all, however, outside the hut. Leaving those he had just brought up to find companionship with their old comrades, Seth dismounted Pearl before the door of the hut, and led her within.

The hut consisted of but one apartment, inclosed by the four walls, and shut in from the sky by the sloping roof.

It was evidently used by its rude tenants for all the purposes of living. Cooking utensils, as repulsive as pot-black and grease could make them, were huddled indiscriminately in the corner of the fireplace at the gable end of the house. Blankets were disposed so as to afford undoubted evidence of occupancy by men who probably slept with their boots on. The trappings of man and beast littered the floor, or hung against the wall, according to the mood of the owner.

A cursory glance showed all this to Pearl, and what appeared to be a man yet asleep in the corner.

Having no interest in the stranger, she turned and faced Seth as soon as she had crossed the threshold.

"Do you intend to shelter me here with an indiscriminate crowd of your ruffianly friends?" she asked.

"I'll trouble you to step this way," was his answer, leading the way toward the seeming sleeper.

After a glance of doubt and surprise, Pearl followed him coldly.

She did not look at the man in the corner till she came quite near, and realized that this recumbent figure was their destination.

When she did look at it, she saw with a thrill of dread that it lay on its back, as indicated by its veiled outlines, the blanket being pulled up over its face.

"A dead man!" was her inward comment.

"What have we to do with that?"

Seth stooped, and without warning drew the blanket off the face.

The girl stared, her eyes dilating, her mouth slowly opening, her breath suspended.

At last, with one wild shriek she clasped her head in her hands.

For a moment it seemed as if the shock would deprive her of her reason; but then relief came, and with a heart-broken cry she cast herself on the motionless body.

"Owen! Owen! Oh, my darling! Owen!"

Short, sharp, a cry of terror and agonized appeal.

She had seized his head between her hands, and shook it as if to awaken him.

His flesh was cold and clammy. The head rolled at her will. The eyes, half open, did not change.

"Dead! dead! dead!" she wailed, rocking her body from side to side.

Seth watched her in grim silence. His face was not a pleasant one to see just then. It was not agreeable occupation to watch the woman he intended to make his wife betray so much emotion over his late rival, perhaps.

Suddenly she desisted from her grief, and turned to him.

"And you," she said, rising slowly to her feet, with a stony calm as suddenly superseding the gust of grief, "you are his murderer!"

"I've heard," answered Seth, with something of Colonel Flood's humor, "that you yourself had the last shot at him."

The girl started violently. "I?" she cried, in dismay, looking back at the still figure.

"Didn't you?" asked Seth.

"But he did not die of that! Oh, his murderer!" panted the wretched girl, beginning to wring her hands.

"I didn't say that," answered Seth.

"You didn't say that?"—whirling fiercely upon him. "Dare you trifle with me in such a matter? What is he doing here? Who brought him here, if not you? These horrible men are all your creatures."

"I brought him here fast enough. Did I deny that? What I said was, you had the last shot at him; and if he dies, you'll be to blame."

"If he dies! He is not dead, then?"

She was on her knees again in an instant, once more striving to recall him to life; trying to open his eyes with her fingers.

"He is dead!" she almost shrieked. "If he is alive, wake him! What is the matter with him? Oh, my darling! my murdered darling!"

And she cast herself prone on the body, and fell to kissing the unresponsive lips.

"Owen! Owen!" she whispered into his dull ear. "I loved you! I love you now, more than my very soul! Oh, can't you hear me? Owen! Oh, Owen, wake for only a moment!"

"I thought we was to talk business," interposed Seth, savagely. "You'll have a chance to show how much you love him presently. But, if you'll git off of him, an' not smother out of him the mite o' life he's got left, I'll show you that he hain't kicked the bucket yet. Git off of him, will you?"

He pulled her away.

"Show me that he lives," she pleaded, sitting where Seth's rough grasp had left her, with her hands locked hard in her lap.

"Ho, Dave!" shouted Seth turning toward the door.

The chief of the outlaws, who was sitting on a log, amusing himself by jabbing the point of a very bright-bladed knife, of unusual shape, into the wood, while he listened to a rather highly spiced narrative of personal adventure from one of Seth's earlier party, rose at the call, but stopped to say, with a drawl:

"You lie like a book, pardner. I must hear you ag'in, some time, when you've made up another one o' them."

Then coolly turning away, careless of the flush and stare of the story-teller, he strode leisurely into the hut.

"Waal, boss," he said, on entering, "what's wanted now?"

"I reckon I hain't got the hang o' the resurrection business," replied Seth. "How am I to show the lady that this snoozer ain't the stiff he looks. He does look most uncommon like it, Dave," he added, anxiously "I've trusted it all to you."

"An' I know my business. What do you want? To have him out o' that?"

"No. Let him stay a while. Jest show us that he ain't dead."

"Nothin' easier, ma'am," was Dave's cool assurance to Pearl.

He had had the grace, on entering the house, to observe a formality which Seth had neglected. He had taken off his hat.

He bowed when he addressed the girl, with an ease which at once marked a man not of the ruder order, whatever his degradation in crime.

Taking a bit of broken looking-glass from a chink in the wall, he held it for a moment over Owen's lips, and then showed it to Pearl.

"You see, ma'am, that he breathes."

"But what is the matter with him?" she quavered. "Why does he look so? Oh, sir! if you can help him—"

"That's enough fur the present," interposed Seth. "You know that he is alive. To satisfy you, I will say that he has been drugged. I made him think that I was givin' him a dose o' poison; but I wasn't, all the same. Blast him! I had that much satisfaction out of him. But he's all right when we want to straighten him round—that is to say, if we want to. The little scratch you gave him was only a love-token. He couldn't pick it out among some he's had sence."

"But let's git back to business. Air you satisfied that he's alive?"

"What is this about his being drugged?" asked Pearl, turning to Dave.

"It is just as has been represented to you," he answered. "Nothing is to be apprehended from it. And the wounds he has are not serious."

"He may live?"

"There was the tremulous eagerness of love in her voice and in her clasped hands.

"To a hundred years, from all the harm this does him."

"Oh, if I might believe it!"

"You may, implicitly."

"Truly?"

She still hung upon his assurance.

"You have my word of honor, madame."

As the outlaw said this, with a ceremonious bow, his voice lost its assumed uncouthness in the refinement of gentle breeding.

"And who are you, sir?—if you will excuse me!" panted Pearl, in wonder.

"Have you ever heard of Dave Dirk, the King of No Man's Land?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!" assented Pearl.

"I hope you have heard him spoken of as a man of his word."

"I have indeed."

"I am he, at your service! I assure you again, you need not be apprehensive from this gentleman's appearance."

"Oh, I will believe you!" murmured Pearl, taking his hand in both her own, in her gratitude.

"That'll do fur you, Dave," interposed Seth. "I wish't I had your style. Thar's a heap in winnin' ways, an' that's a fact."

Dave bowed, and retired with his usual compliance, but disregarding of an involuntary movement on Pearl's part to detain him.

"Now to business ag'in!" said Seth, briskly. "We've settled that pint. His nibs is alive an' kickin'. So fur, so good! Now, in the light o' that fact, I beg leave to trot out my leetle proposition ag'in. Will you marry me?"

"Never!" cried the girl, with an outburst of indignant repudiation. "Now less than ever before!"

"Hold on! You ain't down to hard-pan yet. The day you marry me I start that chap on the back track, to be set down jest whar I picked him up, as good as new."

"What! I am to purchase his safety with the sacrifice of my life?"

"Waal, I reckon that's about the size of it."

"You monster!"

"You'd better not git used to too many pet names o' that sort. They might come in unbandy before the children."

The girl was too much outraged to reply.

"Ye see," pursued Seth, "you set a heap by him. You'd hate to see me sp'ile him. I'd hate to have to, myself. Now, I kind o' calculated you'd druther be Mrs. Seth Wendover. He'd go through life callin' you blessed, ye know. It'll be better'n nothin', to have his gratitude."

"And do you mean to say that you would accept a wife who loved another man sufficiently to give herself to the degradation of life with such a bound as you, for his sake?"

"Oh, I'll take you as I kin git you."

"You will never get me, under any conditions!"

"That's final! I'd druther you'd say the other way."

"That is final!"

"All right! all right! You know your own mind."

Seth blew a shrill whistle.

The girl stared to see what would come of it.

The door of the hut, which Dave Dirk had closed after him, was thrown open less gently, and in strode a couple of as conscienceless ruffians as were ever at the bidding of a ruthless master.

Seth indicated his pleasure with a wave of the hand.

The men set about his bidding as if it were pre-arranged.

One of them took a rawhide lasso down from where it hung on a peg in the wall, and holding a bight of it behind him as an awkward jumper holds a skipping-rope, swung it upward so that it caught on a hook driven in the ridge-pole of the house.

Tossing the noose-end to his companion, he walked in the opposite direction with the end he retained.

The second ruffian ran the slip-knot back so as to enlarge the noose to his liking, and advanced with it toward where Owen lay, all unconscious.

Meanwhile Seth stepped to a window, and called:

"Waal, boys, if any o' you care to take in this circus, it won't cost ye nothin'."

Without waiting for a second bidding, the crowd without gathered about, some staring in at the windows, some crowding in through the door.

"Oh, what are you about to do?" quavered Pearl, seeing the man kneel beside Owen, and lift his head so as to slip the coil of the lasso under it, and draw it tight about his neck.

"To finish off this chap hyar," answered Seth, unconcernedly.

"To hang him?" cried Pearl, aghast.

"O' course. He ain't no manner o' use to none of us."

"Pull away thar, Steve. Lend him a hand, some of ye, will ye?"

They pulled with a will; and with a piercing shriek Pearl saw the man she loved dragged from the shake-down in which he lay, out upon the floor.

"Up with him!" shouted Seth.

And a second pull had him half suspended, with his limp legs dragging on the floor.

But now the girl was on her knees, with her arms about the body, trying to lift its weight.

"Stop! stop! stop!" she shrieked.

The men slackened the rope, and the body sunk in a heap on the floor in her embrace.

Seth began to swear at them for their forbearance.

"Hold on, Cap!" ventured one of them.

"Maybe the lady's changed her mind."

Seth turned to Pearl, as if this suggestion came to him unexpectedly.

She knelt with her face resting upon Owen's, sobbing convulsively.

"I'll give you one more show," he said, sulkily. "I don't reckon it'll do no good. Ef you say it's a whack between us, back to his ranch he goes, all O. K. Ef you stick to your no, up he goes on the run, an' no more foolishness."

"Oh, are you men?" cried the girl, turning to the crowd, "and can you stand and see this wickedness—even share in it?"

"They're my men!" declared Seth, "paid fur with my money; an' they carry out my orders. What do you say? Is it a go, or no?"

Then the girl looked at him, with a sudden change in her manner.

"What is it you propose?" she asked, deliberately.

"Marry me, an' his nibs goes free; refuse, an' I string him up before your eyes!"

"What guaranty have I that you will keep your promise, if I make the sacrifice?"

The words seemed nearly to choke her; yet she forced herself through them.

"You have my word."

"Than which nothing is more worthless."

"Waal, I reckon it'll have to do ye."

"It will not do me. Why should such a villain as you scruple to prove himself a liar of equal quality? You cannot expect me to trust the purchase-money in your hands till I am assured of my purchase."

"I will swear—"

"An oath on such lips!"

"Don't you 'low as my oath is good for nothin'?"

"Less than nothing!"

"Waal, then, I reckon we can't dicker. Somebody's got to resk somethin'."

"Let the risk be yours, then. I think I can give you better security. This is my proposition: Let me see Owen Adair safe in his home. I will then marry you."

"Oh, no!" sneered Seth, with a knowing leer. "You're mighty cunnin'; but I wasn't born last year myself."

"You will not accept my proposal?"

"Nary!"

"If I swear?"

Seth wavered. He wanted her. But his native villainy made him doubt her.

"It's too good," he said, "I'll stand by my own offer. That, or nothin'. You kin take it, or leave it alone. The more you talk about it, the more I'm gittin' out o' the notion o' the hull thing. It wa'n't my idee in the first place. I wanted to fix that snoozer; an' I want to now, bad!"

Was it possible that his craving for revenge would get the better of his passion after all, and cause him to abandon the project he had carried so far; or was he only trying to scare her into compliance?

The look he bent upon Owen was certainly wolfish.

Trembling in every nerve, Pearl looked about as if for help. Would she sacrifice herself if assured of its efficacy in saving the man she loved, in spite of the belief that he had abandoned her for another?

"Madam," said Dave Dirk, advancing and bowing. "I understood you to say that you had heard of me."

"I have heard of you," admitted Pearl.

"Have you heard that my word is inviolate when given, whatever the cost to myself?"

"That is your reputation, as I was told."

"I wish to help you, if I can. I see that your heart is set on saving this gentleman."

"Oh, believe me, it is!" burst forth Pearl, clasping her hands in tremulous hope.

"Will you trust to me, then, if I pledge myself to see that the engagement with reference to your friend is strictly carried out?"

"Oh, sir!" cried the girl, springing forward, and seizing his hand, "if you are willing to befriend me, why not save me from this horrible fate? You can save us both, if you will."

She was sobbing in her eagerness. One would have thought her distress would touch any heart.

Dave Dirk proved invulnerable. Shaking his head, he said:

"You must excuse me from interfering in another man's affairs. I never tolerate any interference in my own. But I can and will see that an agreement is faithfully observed."

"But in common humanity! Such a monster as that has no rights."

"I have nothing to do with humanity," answered Dave, coldly. "I am willing to help you in the only way consistent with my principles."

The girl stared at him, slowly falling back.

"So, then," she said, finally, "this is the very best I can do?"

"So it appears. I know of no alternative."

"And you pledge your honor to the return of this gentleman to his home, at once, and without bodily harm?"

"I do, madame."

Pearl looked at Owen, slowly wringing her hands.

"Leave me!" she said, waving her hand to them. "Give me five minutes alone with him."

Dave glanced significantly at Seth. The latter indicated his compliance to the others. The room was vacated, and the faces retired from the windows.

Alone, the girl threw herself on the body of her insensible lover. In that first hour when they plighted their troth she had not given such evidence of tenderness as she did now that he could not know anything of it.

Presently she went to the door of the hut and announced:

"I am ready!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH.

Now that the end of his long plotting was really attained, Seth Wendover could scarcely realize his good luck, as he called it.

He stared at Pearl, as if to see if she truly meant it.

The girl was as white as marble. Her eyes did not waver. They burned like coals of fire. She looked straight at him, with a steadiness that was a little disconcerting. Somehow he felt as if she were taking his measure.

"Waal, I'll be blowed!" he ejaculated.

After looking about a moment rather aimlessly, he went on:

"Ef I'd counted on this thing comin' so easy, I'd 'a' had things in better shape—I would so."

Turning to Pearl, he explained:

"I've got the minister to git. Oh, it's all right. I kin git him fast enough. But ef I'd 'lowed as you'd come down so easy, I'd 'a' had him on the ground. But I won't keep ye waitin' long. I'll take ye while ye're in the humor, you bet!"

He then invited her to make herself comfortable while he was gone; and she went back into the hut, while he mounted his horse and rode away.

His last charge, as he rode away in exuberant spirits, was:

"Boys, start some bonfires around this hyar ranch ag'in' my gittin' back. And knock in the head o' the whisky-bar'l at my expense. I want some gay doin's at my weddin', I kin tell you!"

The boys were in no wise reluctant to comply with this request; and when Seth returned, somewhat after nightfall, the place was as light as day, and the company as merry as he could have desired.

He was accompanied by a wretched specimen of humanity, a man, plainly, who had gone to the bad. His dress, in its cut, bore some reminiscences of a calling once filled at least with respectability.

He was now frowzy, as only a confirmed inebriate can become.

Seth ushered him into the house, and apologized for his appearance before his face, with an unconcern which showed that the man had no self-respect to be considered.

"This hyar ain't a very promisin' specimen; but he's the best I could git; an' I reckon he kin tie us up as tight as anybody. I never went in fur frills myself; an' he he'll do fur me, ef he'll do fur you."

Pearl looked at the candidate for her approving judgment with undisguised contempt.

He doffed his shabby hat and bowed before her in fawning humility.

"I've seen better days, madam," he said. "This is not a country in which a servant of the Lord is likely to prosper."

"Put a compress on that snoozer!" shouted one of the revelers. "Don't yese the lady's gorge is raisin'? Blamed ef he don't gag me; an' I ain't noways nice."

The wretched parson turned and bowed deprecatingly at his depreciator.

"Gentlemen," he said, his weak and watery eyes wavering as they rested on the floor, "I am here to perform a certain office. I hope to acquit myself in that acceptance. Meanwhile I bespeak your forbearance. I know that I am not an ornament to my profession. But other men have been unfortunate as well. It is possible that even some of you do not recall the past with entire satisfaction."

"Haw! haw! haw! How's that? Got ye thar, Sam! The parson ain't no slouch, I swear! Give 'im a show, boys; give 'im a show."

And by this little readiness of retort, delivered as if apologizing for his very existence, the wretched man won his place of tolerance among them.

"Waal, gents! let's to business," proposed Seth, rubbing his hands in self-gratulation. "Who's to give away the bride? Dave, I'd as lieve have you fur a father-in-law as anybody I know. Step up, ole man, an' do the polite thing."

"If agreeable to the lady," said Dave, with his never-failing bow.

"Isn't this enough of a mockery as it is?" asked Pearl, severely. "Let us get through with it with as little delay as possible."

"Oh, waal, I'm bound to have the thing hold water," insisted Seth. "You don't leave out nothin', ye onderstand, fur lawyers to quibble over in a divorce court."

"You need have no fears of such a resort," said Pearl, looking at him in a way that might have made some men's flesh creep.

The marriage service was then gone through with, Pearl giving her responses in a voice that quivered with intensity, not with weakness, and the twain were pronounced man and wife.

For a moment the principals of this drama stood regarding each other. Then Seth suddenly tossed his hat to the roof-tree, and burst into a shout of triumphant laughter.

Pearl turned from him to Dave Dirk.

"I have performed my part of the contract?" she asked, coldly.

"Madame, you have."

"It is entirely complete."

"Unquestionably."

"And, whatever happens, you are now bound to see that the gentleman for whom I have sacrificed myself is returned unharmed to his home."

"I am so bound."

"May God requite you as you prove faithful to the obligation!"

"Amen, madame, with all my heart!"

"I thank you. You have not dealt generously with me; but I will forgive that if you are now just. I thank you again."

"Madame, I am indebted to you for the privilege of serving you. Believe me, I would have done more, had I not been bound by a prior obligation."

The girl turned from him, back to her husband.

"Have I kept my engagement?" she asked.

"You have so," replied Seth.

"I promised to marry you. I said nothing as to what was to follow."

"Oh, I'll look out fur that. Don't you worry."

The girl hesitated a moment, and then asked:

"Do you mean to force me to live with you as your wife?"

"You bet your sweet life! What did I marry you fur?"

"Not for what that marriage will bring you. Do you know what I had resolved upon before I consented to this desecration?"

"It don't make no manner o' difference what you resolved upon. It's what I resolved upon that is to be law in my family, my dear. I've been curtsy-bendin' to you while you had the rope-end; but from this out I rule the roost, or thar'll be music in the air!"

"Your reign will be brief. I mean to kill you!"

And with the threat a revolver flashed into view in her hand.

"Oh! You do, eh?" cried Seth. "Pepper away."

And dropping his hands upon his knees, he leaned toward her, as if to afford her the most favorable opportunity.

The grin of derision on his face sent the blood rushing back upon her heart with a fearful doubt. But steadying herself, she took aim directly between the villain's eyes, and pulled trigger.

The room rung with the sharp report. The smoke cleared away. Seth had not winked.

"So! you 'lowed I'd leave you with that leetle gim-crack, did you?" he laughed. "Ye didn't 'low as I seen ye salt it down when you got into yer clo's. Ef you hadn't never slep' none, ye might 'a' had me now. But ye didn't close my eye, though ye closed yer own. Try it ag'in."

But Pearl's arm sunk nerveless to her side, her face blanched with an agony unutterable.

She reeled, and might have fallen, but at that instant her wandering eye caught sight of that which sent the stagnant blood bounding wildly through her veins again.

There was a heavy tramp of feet at the door, any a crowd pressed in, bearing a bound man in their midst.

At sight of him Pearl uttered a shriek, and then leaped toward him with the fleetness of a deer.

"Oh, father, father, save me!"

And she fell at his feet, clasping his knees.

"Save ye!" repeated her father, beginning to tug at his bonds, though not wildly as yet.

His eye had caught sight of Seth.

"Seth! Seth!" he cried. "You hyar? You've got her?"

"You bet I have, ole pard!" answered Seth, laughing, as he swaggered up with his hands in his pockets.

"But how's this?" asked the boomer chief, in bewilderment at the manner of his subordinate. "Whar's the villain—Adair? Have you put a bullet through him? An' thar's some mistake. These hyar seem to be your friends. They've trussed me up as you see. I thought 'em Adair's scavengers!"

The scorn of the old fellow was fine to see.

"Oh, father!" moaned Pearl, "this is the scoundrel who tore me away from you. He is the traitor—Seth himself! Kill him or me! The

world isn't big enough to hold us both after this. But, oh, you cannot!—he has you too, my poor father!"

Standing with his feet wide apart, Seth tipped his hat over his eyes, and began to scratch the back of his head. Insolence could have taken no more exasperating attitude.

"Is this so?" panted old Jason Pancoast, after staring a moment to take the situation in.

"It air the melancholy fact, dad!" assented Seth, with a grin. "I kin call you dad now. It is my supreme happiness to be your dutiful son-in-law."

"My what?"

"Son-in-law! son-in-law! Don't you know what a son-in-law is? He's the biggest dose you ever swallowed, ole man—this one. He's like to stick crossways in your throat, an' choke ye."

"Father, he forced me to it! I have detested him from the first."

Then stout old Jason Pancoast looked around upon the crowd of his captors.

"Air thar any men in this crowd? I'm callin' fur men with blood in their veins! Be ye all of ye cowards? Who's got the spunk to take these hyar ropes off me, an' let me stand before this bound, man to man? I'll make a son-in-law of him!"

Seth looked around upon them questioningly, yet with perfect confidence. He was not disappointed. Not a man moved.

"You see?" he laughed. "You ain't no good, ole man. You bain't got no backin' in this hyar crowd."

"What's the reason he hain't?" demanded a voice that rung out like a clarion blast.

There was a rush through the door and windows, a moment of wild confusion, and two parties stood arrayed against each other with drawn revolvers.

"Ha, ha! ha, ha!" shouted old Jason Pancoast.

He stood unbound at the head of one of the parties. Revolvers were being thrust into his hands on either side. Aleck Hoover stood shoulder to shoulder with him!

"Hold on!" cried the sturdy old man. "We hain't ready to open the ball yet. Thar's only one chunk o' meat in that crowd what I want. Don't nobody spile it fur me, gentlemen!"

No one needed any explanation of his words. They were too used to that sort of a challenge.

"It seems to me," interposed Dave Dirk, in a voice as composed as if nothing unusual were in progress, "that that is the gentlemanly thing to do. It saves a lot of good men that nobody cares to lose, and affords greater satisfaction to those really concerned. I have always viewed it as a privilege myself."

He said this as if it were only a casual suggestion, which might be accepted and acted upon or let alone.

Every eye was turned upon Seth Wendover. His face had lengthened considerably. The insolence had all gone out of it. It was now fairly bloodless.

But public sentiment was making a demand upon him, and his wolfish instincts came to his support.

"It's a pity to have to shoot yer father-in-law—an' on yer weddin'-day too," he said, with an affectation of carelessness. "But ef nothin' else will do him, I reckon I'll have to accommodate him."

"That'll suit me to death!" cried old Jason, eagerly.

"We may end better than we began—with a little gentlemanly deportment," observed Dave Dirk, with fine sarcasm.

This was the first expression of opinion on what he had allowed to go forward without interference.

"We don't want too much room," suggested Pancoast. "We'd order make this hyar place do cornerways."

"I'm agreeable," declared Seth. "I like quick work when I've got any to do."

By tacit assent, Aleck Hoover acted as Jason's second, and Dave Dirk as Seth's.

While they were coming to an agreement, Pearl hung for a moment in her father's arms. She told him all, in a gush of passionate words, and their reconciliation was complete.

Then Aleck held his hand, perhaps for the last time, in an iron grip.

"How came you to be on hand jest in the nick o' time? I'll never forget ye, for this chance!"

"I was hyar before you, ole man; an' I knowed you was comin'. But I was playin' fur double stakes. Ef I fought fur you, I might give these scalawags warnin', an' so lose Pearl; an' ef I struck fur Pearl, I might scare off the crowd that held you, and lose you. So I concluded to resk all on one blow; an' you see what come of it."

"We'll see what comes of it in a minute! Now stand back, an' give me a show!"

The principals were placed in opposite corners of the room, their respective crowds packing themselves into the other two, so as to leave a clear space diagonally through the middle.

Seth and his backers filled the gable end furthest from the door, with the still unconscious Cattle King lying between them, directly opposite the door.

Pancoast and his dozen picked men were in the front of the building, with Pearl kneeling just beside the doorway.

Then came the call:

"Gentlemen, are you ready? One! two! fire!"

There was a double flash and report. Seth Wendover fell forward on his face without a groan. Jason Pancoast turned toward his daughter, with a smile and an ineffectual effort to speak.

In a hoarse, hissing whisper, she articulated the word:

"Father!"

Not she—she could not—but Aleck Hoover sprung across the doorway and received the old man in his arms.

"He nipped me, Aleck," was the hoarse whisper; "but he didn't fetch me!"

In the excitement within, nobody noticed the swift dashing up of a horse. But as Aleck crossed the doorway, another figure—that of a woman—flashed in.

After one dizzy stare around, she sped across the floor to where Seth Wendover had fallen almost upon Owen Adair, and stood over them, staring at the latter.

Of course she thought him the victim of the previous shot, that which Pearl had fired at her mocking husband.

"Owen!" she shrieked, lifting her left hand to her heart.

The next instant, and before any one had any intimation as to what she was about to do, her right hand went up to her head, and there was an explosion, the significance of which no one need be told.

With a just audible sigh she fell upon the body of the man she loved so passionately.

While both parties gathered about, for the moment rendered oblivious to their hostility by this unexpected tragedy, a head was thrust in at the door—no less a one than that which for so many years had meditated evil on the shoulders of Colonel Flood.

Drawing back out of sight, he gave utterance to a signal which caused his own men to prick up their ears, though those to whom it was unfamiliar passed it by unheeded.

They who had had Jason Pancoast in charge slipped out of the room unobserved, and joined the Kentuckian without.

They were hardly assembled under command of their employer, when another set of men attempted to follow their example.

These were Seth Wendover's backers. Their head fallen, they began to fear Jason Pancoast's vengeance. They might have had good reason, but for the interference of Dave Dirk. The boomer chief was eager to square accounts with all who had been concerned in his daughter's abduction, as soon as he recovered from the shock of his wound. But, Dirk declared that the duel made all old scores on that account off.

However, the men felt uneasy under Pancoast's blazing eye, and were beginning to sneak out, when they were stopped by the challenge:

"Halt! No man crosses that threshold alive!"

"It is Colonel Flood's voice," said Aleck Hoover. "What's he doin' in this thing?"

Before an answer could be made the cry went up:

"The house is afire! He's 'lowin' to burn us out!"

At that everybody looked at everybody else for an explanation of this new and startling development.

"He's standin' in with Seth Wendover!" suggested Aleck Hoover.

In a twinkling there was a demonstration which made it look as if Seth's friends were about to be massacred.

Thereupon Jake Sharp lost his head, and being near the door, he dashed out, throwing his hands above his head, and shouting:

"Boys, don't shoot! It's me!"

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when there came a remorseless execution of Colonel Flood's threat; and he fell upon his face stone dead.

"No!" cried Jason Pancoast, while he turned eyes of murderous hatred upon his old enemy. "It's this hyar snoozer! Who would a Cattle King be in with but one of his own stripe?"

"Father!" implored Pearl, casting herself upon Owen's body, and encircling it in her arms.

Then, seeing no relenting there, she appealed to Dave Dirk.

"I have your promise that he shall be returned home unhurt."

"I stand by my word against all comers. Whether the fellow who has caged us is the friend of this man, or not, the blow that reaches him must pass through my dead body."

Then everything was at a stand. Meanwhile an ominous crackling gave warning that the flames were not stayed.

But, what was this? While they delayed, deliberating whether to rush out into the firelight to fall by the bullets of hidden foes, a rush of many hoofs, a chorus of wild cheers, the sounds of furious battle, which quickly began to recede.

The prisoners rushed out to find their foes driven off for them.

Before they could determine whether to join in the chase with these new-found friends, if indeed they were friends, the shrill notes of a bugle sounded a recall, and they found themselves surrounded by the men who had come so opportunely to their aid.

At the head of this party appeared Major Browning with a lot of boys in blue at his back, while Carl Berkhart headed a much larger party of cowboys.

As these were little less enemies than the others, the meeting of chiefs that was soon effected had much the character of a council of war. But, they came to an amiable arrangement notwithstanding, the result of which was, that Carl took possession of his friend, whom Dave Dirk relieved in a measure from the effects of the drug administered, and of the body of the woman he had come too late to save.

Owen was too stupid to know anything or anybody; but he was alive and in no serious danger.

Jason Pancoast went his way with his daughter. Seth's backers were glad of the chance to make themselves scarce. Dave Dirk saw the destruction of his house without much regret; he could easily re-establish himself.

Colonel Flood, his machinations exposed, disappeared, leaving his affairs to be settled by an attorney.

Ethel Browning, saddened by her experience of Western life, went Eastward with the body of her friend. But she was followed in due time by one whom, after the battle in No Man's Land, she always accounted a hero. And Carl, if he didn't take to broncho-busting, at least took to woman-taming, declaring that that gave as good evidence of courage. However, it is only fair to say that most of his friends think he has an easy job.

After Oklahoma was opened to settlement, the hostile feelings of the days of contention cooled off considerably; and then an ex-Cattle King "pre-empted," without opposition, an old claim of his. And what Jason Pancoast always declared came true. When Pearl picked out her man, the job was done.

THE END.

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